Maintenance Work... Wait a Few Minutes, Please

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Maintenance Work... Wait a Few Minutes, Please

by kloud

Summary

Shen Qingqiu's beloved white lotus is now forever blackened! And what's worse, he's back early!? System!! Hello!? You promised to help!!!

Why does Luo Binghe keep acting like he can see the System??

Binghe!?

No!! Don't touch that!!!!

In which Luo Binghe has "leveled up" enough to sense the System's presence, and decides to "help" Shen Qingqiu get rid of it. Everything, of course, goes wrong. Now the two are being thrown back and forth between two different worlds. When Liu Qingge steps in to provide an extra hand, he ends up getting tangled into the entire mess.

Forced proximity. Identity reveal. Reverse transmigration. What more could go wrong?

(Just wait and see.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Edit: Kloud from the ✨future✨ here!

Just wanted to say, this fic does have explicit content, but it is all optional. Each explicit chapter is marked, and has a summary at the end of the chapter. This isn't an explicit-focused work, it just happens to contain it. If you just want to get to the goods, skip to chapters 28, 34, and 46. (To be updated upon work completion.)

I did want to give a warning - this fic is a somewhat selfish exploration of the degradation of my own health. There are some heavy and serious things discussed in this fic. None of the characters are perfect. They have flaws. Some do say some pretty hurtful things. Though, these are all addressed and resolved.

Please take care and read content warning! I do promise that there is a happy ending.

Alright!! Thank you so much for reading! Enjoy!

Around 3,000 words for this first chapter, which is roughly a 15 minute reading time.

This will be my first personal work for the SVSSS world, so please excuse any mistakes and do let me know if there is anything I should update or change.

I have this fic fully plotted out and mostly written. I plan to post consistently every Saturday until the fic is complete, considering that the chapters tend to be pretty short.

Thank you for reading!

This fic begins in Jin Lan City, the night that Shen Qingqiu realized that his sweet white sheep has returned early. He has leaped out of his window, and ran away into the night...

CW: Canon-Typical violence, forceful blood feeding, chronic illness, uncaring family, and a generic hospital trip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The only sound in the alley was Shen Qingqiu’s strained, gasping wheezes. Sweat prickled across his skin as the cool night air breathed over him. His earlier flight should not have left him so breathless. His lungs burned, and pain dominoed up his body. In front of him, Luo Binghe smiled. It was warm and gentle, a grand contrast to the chilling blackness in his eyes.

“After so many years of separation, we meet amidst golden wind and jade dew, yet Shizun calls someone else’s name. That truly saddens this disciple a little.”

Shen Qingqiu’s eyebrows folded. He fought to keep his face clean of emotion; fear was a beast inside his chest. He was almost certain Luo Binghe could feel the tenacious tempo of his heart with the hold on his neck. His jaw clenched as that hold tightened. Black spots started to dot his vision. It was too soon. Luo Binghe had returned far too early. He should have more time than this!

A light flashed in the corner of his eye, and a dialogue box popped up in front of him. Through the haziness of his fear, he barely caught the words:

[Accept a System tip to resolve the small complication our valued customer is facing?]

Shen Qingqiu almost laughed. “Small complication?” Years of practice smothering his emotions was the only thing that saved him. He had no doubt if he started laughing that his once beloved little sheep would truly show how far Shen Qingqiu’s betrayal had blackened his soul.

As he glanced at Luo Binghe’s face, his heart stilled.

Luo Binghe had his head cocked to one side, with the smallest of wrinkles forming between his eyebrows.

The System, almost as if sensing something was off, abandoned him.

What the fuck?? HELLO? Where is my tip?!!

With a desperate breath, Shen Qingqiu caught Luo Binghe’s wrist. He did not dig his nails into him, as much as his terror desperately wanted him to. The hold suddenly loosened. He sucked air greedily into his lungs, and collapsed to the ground. His palms scraped against rough stone. Gentle hands caught his arms, and guided him back up to his feet. As soon as he was steady, Luo Binghe drew his hands down his arms and caught lightly onto his wrists. His fingers pressed against his quickened pulse. He was so caught up in the warmth of that smile, with memories nibbling the back of his mind, that he forgot that he had nearly blacked out seconds ago from those same hands.

Luo Binghe had changed. He was no longer a little sheep. The softened fat of youth had hardened into sharp cheekbones, and an even stronger jaw. His shoulders were wide, with strength decorating his arms with muscles. He was beautiful. Every inch of the man before him was the very essence of beauty and power. A strange twist of emotions boiled in Shen Qingqiu’s chest: pride and absolute dread. His disciple had truly grown up. It was too bad that he would have to look at that sweet, beautiful face as it tore his limbs free from his body.

Would he still be wearing that same gentle smile as he did it?

“Why did Shizun think to take such a late night stroll? Especially with the state of his health?”

Drawing back his shoulders, Shen Qingqiu straightened. His ears heated. Luo Binghe had used his hold on him to check his meridians!? Not that the flare-up wasn't obvious. *Fuck you, Without a Cure!* He tugged one hand free from Luo Binghe's grasp, only to find the other trapped in a harsh, bone-creaking grip.

Luo Binghe's eyes flashed dangerously.

"This master can… take walks whenever he pleases," Shen Qingqiu rasped. He wished he still wasn't so winded. No, protagonist! That wasn't terror in his voice!!

System?? Help? Shen Qingqiu cried out.

"Besides," Shen Qingqiu pressed. "Luo Binghe should worry about his own health." His eyes slid down to the hand that grasped onto his wrist. There he saw the mark of the sower. By all level-headed reasoning, he knew that the disease would not harm Luo Binghe. That knowledge did nothing for the worry that wormed in his brain.

[Friendly reminder: the protagonist is a Heavenly Demon, immune to most poisons and diseases!]

…

[You're welcome. No B-Points will be deducted for this explanation!]

As Shen Qingqiu went to dismiss the dialogue box, he saw it again: that curious tilt to Luo Binghe's head. The fingers against his pulse dug deeper. Pain smarted up his arm, and he forced himself not to cringe. He swallowed the discomfort down.

"Shizun has learned some new tricks," Luo Binghe said. The warmth in his voice had a sharp edge, and his eyes were lifeless things. "Shizun truly harbors such hatred towards his own disciple, he goes to such extremes to call for help?"

Wait.

What?

There was something dangerous in Luo Binghe's eyes. Any hope that Shen Qingqiu had that he might be able to ask for forgiveness was dashed on that darkening glimmer. Fear laced through him. Terror wiped his mind of any sense. Luo Binghe took a single step forward. Without thought, Shen Qingqiu brought his free hand to Xiu Ya and began to draw it.

Fuck, FUCK-

He had to run. He had to get out there. He was a rabbit in the jaws of a wolf. It was too late. That didn't stop him from trying to kick out his feet in one last attempt to leap away.

Luo Binghe moved at the same time, and caught the blade with his bare hand.

Before the sword even fully drew from its scabbard, Luo Binghe stopped it. His blood dripped down the cold metal. Shen Qingqiu stared, aghast, as his disciple's blood drenched

the blade once again. A torrent of emotions rushed through him, none of which he could fully digest before he was pinned to the wall once more.

“Is this lowly one truly such a beast that Shizun can’t stand holding a single conversation with him?” Luo Binghe snarled. His eyes flashed red.

No, it's not that! Shen Qingqiu cried, then paused, *Well, with how you're acting right now, sort of. SYSTEM!!*

[Yes, Host?]

WHERE IS MY TIP!!

“Who does Shizun call for!?”

W-what… what? WHAT?

Luo Binghe growled. Anger twisted his expression so fiercely, it no longer was anything Shen Qingqiu recognized. There was only blood lust in those eyes.

Luo Binghe couldn’t sense the System… could he???

Could he have leveled up so much-

“If Shizun wants so badly to be tied to another, why not this disciple as well?” Luo Binghe caught Shen Qingqiu’s hair and wrenched his head back. His bloodied hand clamped over his nose and mouth.

Hot iron hit his tongue. Shen Qingqiu fought, trying to twist away. The hold on him tightened. He held his breath to close his throat, only to choke in surprise as a leg shoved between his own and nailed him to the wall. He flailed.

Motherfucker – SYSTEM!!!!

[Access privileges activated. Use key item to maintain state of living?]

His vision was starting to splotch again. *Fuck fuck fuck!* Despite his best efforts, his body betrayed him and he tried to gasp in a breath. Blood slid down his throat, and he started choking in earnest.

[Item is-]

“There it is.” Luo Binghe threw out a clawed hand, one drenched in demonic energy, and cleaved through the dialogue box. It splintered.

The dialogue box *broke*. Shards of bright light exploded outwards, demonic energy threading into it like a parasite. Then there was agony. It was as if someone had grasped onto the threads of his nerves and tried wrenching them from his body. Feverish heat burned through him. He didn’t realize he was screaming until Luo Binghe’s hand fell from his mouth; that wretched sound was *him?*

It was an inhuman noise – something he hadn't even expected he could *make.*

All at once, the blood lust fled from Luo Binghe; like someone had ripped open the curtains and he finally saw sunlight.

Shen Qingqiu's vision blackened.

He was on the ground, body seizing.

Someone else was bellowing.

Shizun!

Shizun!!

Ah. He was dying, wasn't he? Blood coated his throat, and he wasn't sure how much of it was Luo Binghe's or his own. Blood parasites flooded into his veins, stirring around in a strange frenzy. Blood spilled from his mouth, his nose, and he was almost certain from his eyes and ears as well. Shen Qingqiu's vision was blurry. The pain was immense. It turned his limbs to cement. Still, above him, his sheep cried. He couldn't have that, could he? What a tender heart. He raised a hand and caught the face of his desperate little sheep. Blood smeared across his cheek.

Panic and fear filled Luo Binghe's eyes.

Shouldn't he be celebrating…?

Shen Qingqiu tried to speak. He had to tell him that it was fine. That this master understood what was coming for him – he understood what he had done. The words stubbornly refused to leave.

Then there was darkness.

A quiet, steady beeping stirred Shen Qingqiu. It brought old memories crashing into him – ones from another life. Years spent in and out of the hospital. His fingers twitched. He wanted to snap at Mu Qingfang; whatever made that sound needed to stop now. Shen Qingqiu hated it. He *hated* it! The beeping quickened.

Voices murmured somewhere in the room.

That's when Shen Yuan gasped, tearing up into a seated position.

At the far side of the room, his father startled. He shot Shen Yuan a warning glance, and responded to someone on the phone. *Be quiet,* that glance warned him.

The beeping quickened. Shen Yuan threw a wild look around the room, one that was so familiar to him. Most hospital rooms were carbon copies of another, with very little variation. Though his family might as well have rented one like a hotel room with how often Shen Yuan had been carted to one.

"...I have something to attend to, you will have to excuse me," his father said. "I will call you back later."

Shen Yuan drew his eyes out towards the large windows that faced the city. His heart rate continued to run in the background like a tiny needle picking at his eardrums. Confusion bent his brow. It took him too long to realize his father was addressing him.

"How long…" Shen Yuan interrupted.

His father's face twitched with irritation.

There was a time in Shen Yuan's life that he would have had both of his parents at his bedside when he woke, both clinging on to him with an aggrieved terror shining in their eyes. That was many years ago, hundreds of hospital trips before now.

"Two days," his father answered.

Two days. Dread started to sink through Shen Yuan, and his heart rate began to settle. There was a precipice that he stood on in his mind. Almost-thoughts pressed against him, waiting for the right moment to toss him in. He shoved it down. *Not. Now.* His body was foreign to him. Aches pulsed up his arms and legs, with his own bones protesting abuse. His arms felt too short. He didn't even recognize his own hands. His hair – where was his hair?

"...are you listening?" His father stepped up next to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. In a rare moment, his face softened. "The doctor said you were in and out of it for a while. Though you should be stable."

Despite the softness of his face, his voice was as clerical as if he were talking about a hiccup in a business plan, not his own son. Shen Yuan had long since learned that some people just reached their capacity for empathy and sorrow, and they simply just… stopped. He had long since stopped blaming them. It was a relief, really, not worrying about being a burden on their hearts.

"I'm fine," Shen Yuan lied. There was no point in telling his father anything else.

With a nod, his father withdrew his hand. "I told your sister you were on a short trip. You will have to come up with where you went."

Right. Shen Yuan's eyes fell shut. If his sister had heard that Shen Yuan had another episode, she wouldn't have left his side. She was the only one left that he hadn't exhausted. Not yet, at least.

Mistaking his silence for something else, his father chided, "She has exams."

"I understand," Shen Yuan said.

There was a long drawn out silence. His father stared him down. Shen Yuan did not want to hear the same lecture again – the same piss poor excuses. He was an adult now. They had spent so much of his youth doting on him. Now it was time for his siblings to be looked after.

It was only fair.

Sometimes, Shen Yuan wondered if they ever quietly pleaded, *Just die.*

"Someone brought my bag?" Shen Yuan asked, keeping his voice civil.

"Yes," his father glanced towards the closet. "Your things are in there, including a change of clothes." He paused as he glanced down at his phone, his eyebrows tightened together. "They'll want to…" He frowned. "I have to take this. Your friend can take you home. Right?"

"Mn." Shen Yuan stared out the window, not really listening.

His father didn't even wait for his answer, heading towards the door. "Hello?" A pause. "No need to apologize. It wasn't anything important." The door clicked shut behind him, leaving Shen Yuan alone.

He stared down at his hands.

He should get out of here, and return to the Jin Zi Weapons shop, and see if there have been any developments with the sowers. Ah. Right. One had touched his hand. His cursed hand. Except that right now there wasn't a single blemish on it. Just bright veins against his paper-thin skin. It was a stranger's hand.

And there was Binghe. Binghe had been cursed as well.

Binghe.

His white sheep.

Now a black lotus.

Shen Yuan's hands curled, his nails digging into his palms. He started shaking. His heart rate picked up, the annoying beep getting faster and faster.

He had done that, didn't he?

The System had told him – hardly gave him a choice. Either betray his little white sheep or die. But it *was* a choice. And instead of dying…

"Binghe," Shen Yuan choked. His arms wrapped tightly around his torso and his eyes squeezed shut. They burned. Something clogged his throat, making it hard to swallow and even harder to breathe.

His cheeks were suddenly wet.

A weakened, strangled noise ruptured from the back of his throat.

Whatever Luo Binghe had done, it brought him back here. That should have been impossible. He transmigrated. He thought he died. He thought…

Two days.

What if it all had been nothing but a dream?

His mind couldn't connect from one thing or another. He kept thinking that Without a Cure was acting up, and that's where his cultivation had gone.

When his eyes closed, he saw Luo Binghe. He had changed so much. He was broken. Shen Yuan had broken him. Was it worth it, if he was going to die anyways? If he was going to come back-

Was any of it real?

A quiet, shuddering breath left Shen Yuan, and his entire body started wracking with soundless sobs. He had learned to cry quietly decades ago. Hands clutched to his chest; he curled his knees up to his chest. Grief smashed his lungs flat, and he couldn't take in a breath. His mouth dropped open in a silent, anguished scream.

Why was being back in his own body worse than being dead?

He didn't want to be like this. He didn't want the last near-decade of his life to be nothing but a *dream.* He wanted his disciples. His peak. His home. He wanted Luo Binghe at his side again, eager to learn with a sun-bright smile.

He wanted Liu Qingge's awkward conversations, and even more awkward gifts.

He would even take Luo Binghe's anger and his revenge. It was better than this. Better than-

Something hit the ground with a clang.

Shen Yuan dropped his hands. He hadn't heard the door open again. Had one of the nurses…?

On the other side of the room stood a man. His presence alone ate up the entirety of the room. He stood tall, with a face so striking it made Shen Yuan's lungs ache. His hair was thick and curled, pulled into a half-up style. A leather jacket adorned his shoulders. He had spikes on his belt, and thick military standard boots with a metal tip over the toes. Every single inch of this man screamed *dangerous.*

"...Binghe?!"

Chapter End Notes

oh hoh hohoho ho...

I wonder who that is... in the room with him... heheheeh

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

About another 3,000 words for this first chapter, which is roughly a 15 minute reading time.

I am purposely taking liberties in a very artistic sense ✨

Also, I am completely floored by all the support so far for this fic!!! Thank you so much for reading!

CW: Canon-Typical violence, anxiety-attack, and more of a generic hospital trip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Qingqiu was dying.

Agony burned in his eyes, even as he tried to force them to something gentle and kind. His lips moved, and instead of words, blood slipped down his chin and colored the front of his robes. It was Luo Binghe's fault. Shen Qingqiu should hate him. He should be angry and spitting fire, cursing Luo Binghe on his last breath. Instead it almost seemed as if he were trying to comfort him.

Luo Binghe's throat was raw from screaming. There was a time in his life where his shizun was large and indomitable; a fortress that would stand for ages to come; a tree that held thousands of lifetimes within its roots; a mountain so steady and certain that nothing could bring it down.

And now he was dying.

His blood parasites worked in a frenzy. Something was happening. Luo Binghe needed *one* fucking moment. He needed a minute, an hour; he needed more time than he was going to get. Because Shen Qingqiu was fading. There was energy sparking around him, violent and vindictive. It was the same energy he had sensed on his shizun before; foreign and cold. Now it tore through Shen Qingqiu's meridians and attacked his brain.

Luo Binghe gathered Shen Qingqiu in his arms (he seemed so small, why was he so small now?) and poured every last bit of his qi into his shizun.

Energy crashed together in a titanic burst.

Everything went black.

There was sterile, clean air, and a peculiar beeping. Luo Binghe snapped awake. He sat in an uncomfortable chair with a man towering over him. The man wore foreign clothing; sharp, crisp cloth that looked unforgiving and exuded wealth. Despite the clean cut of his clothes, he had short hair. He stared down at Luo Binghe in disapproval. It wasn't a look Luo Binghe wasn't used to – it's just been a while since anyone had dared. His eyebrows furrowed, and he shot the man an equally unpleasant look.

He didn't even notice. A small black box sat in the palm of his hand, held up to his ear, and he turned from Luo Binghe to talk into it. He paced leisurely around a small room.

Everything was off. Luo Binghe's body was sluggish and slow. A quiet ache whispered in his joints, and everything was slightly off-color. Muted. He blinked several times, as if waiting for his eyes to adjust. They never did.

Luo Binghe had woken in many strange situations before. The time he spent in the Abyss forced him to learn to adapt or die. It hardly got any easier outside of the Abyss in the demon realm. The creatures he faced there were smarter and cunning. He had woken without his cultivation before. This was fine.

At least, he tried to tell himself that. The air grew thinner. His vision darkened at the edges.

It was *fine.*

His cultivation-

Someone gasped at the far end of the small room.

Atop some sort of plush bed, there was a diminutive man with brittle arms and dark circles bruising the bottoms of his eyes. The beeping quickened as he drew a dazed, confused look over the room. The man on the phone addressed him. Their exchange was cold, that of two strangers. Luo Binghe took stock of himself as the two conversed. Neither seemed at all worried about him or his presence.

First of all, the room was clean and bright, though despite those two things it was rather bleak. It did not seem like a prison cell. The door was closed, and a curtain drew over a thin and tall window beside it. Beyond the gauzy fabric, there was some sort of hallway. The door might be locked, and if so Luo Binghe would just smash through the window. Either he could wrap the fabric around his arm to mitigate the damage, or he could attempt using the chair. The room was mostly bare. It reminded Luo Binghe of a medical recovery room. If that were the case, then why was he *here* and not with-

Shizun-

Next, Luo Binghe wore strange clothes: uncomfortable tight pants that pinched, what felt like several layers of differing styles, and some strange bit of leather that was too tight on his shoulders.

Thirdly, and worst of all, was his cultivation. There was nothing. *Nothing.* Even as he tried to call forth his demonic blood, there was no answer. His hands remained chillingly human. Something wasn't right. Whatever he did to Shen Qingqiu-

Luo Binghe's heart collapsed to the floor. His shizun's screams echoed in his head. Tears burned his eyes. Not once had he ever heard his master so much as *gasp* in pain before. Not even when Without a Cure acted up. Not when Luo Binghe had *slammed him* into a fucking wall-

His eyes squeezed shut and he had a hard time controlling his breathing. He recognized this. Some sort of illness that caused his lungs to snap shut and make the world dark. He had fallen into a few of these in his time in the Abyss. It had gotten better outside of it, only one or two occasionally surprising him. Needles pierced his chest. The edges of his vision narrowed.

Stop, he scorned himself, grabbing tight on to his chest as he stared at a single point on the floor.

You will get through this, Luo Binghe mouthed the words to himself. He always got through it. There was always a goal. He broke down his situation. One: figure out where he was. Two: figure out why he was *here.* Three: as soon as he found someone to *pay attention* to him, he would force them to bring him back to his shizun.

He kept repeating the words, and the steps, and breaking them down further and further into simple, easily achievable things.

He did not think about his cultivation.

He did not think about the fact that everything he had worked for, the only reason he had *ever survived,* was gone. Like it never existed.

The man with the strange block was talking to it again. He left the room without a backwards glance. *It wasn't anything important,* he had said.

Fourthly, Xin Mo was gone.

It should make him panic. It should make him feel unsafe.

Instead he just felt *relief.*

Like sunlight breaking through a heavy curtain of fog. Or stepping into the shade after training underneath the sun for hours.

His muscles relaxed, and he leaned back in his chair to bask in the silence. It *was* silence (other than the incessant beeping.) There were no voices in his head, and no endless, gaping

hunger. The vengeful anger that had plagued him since the moment he stumbled across that thing... it was quiet.

Serene.

It became easier to breathe. His traitorous mind found other things to torment him with. The previous night started to replay in his mind's eye. He took each moment and broke it apart; opening the door to Shizun's room. Chasing him. At what point had he lost control? He had let Xin Mo spill too freely into his mind. It fed his betrayal and his hurt; he never actually *wanted* to hurt Shen Qingqiu. He just wanted answers. Why did he push him into the Abyss? His shizun said that demons had the capacity to be good, and yet he decided Luo Binghe was not. *Why?* Why did his shizun hate him so much? Why wouldn't he just talk to him? Why? *WHY?*

His shizun had told him-

He said-

"Binghe."

The man in the bed… said his name?

Had Luo Binghe heard right…?

His focus shifted back to the peculiar room, with its odd smells, to the strange man on the bed. Huh. The man was crying. A half-drawn curtain blocked most of Luo Binghe's view, and he realized with a start that he must be hidden. Luo Binghe's stomach twisted with sharp discomfort when he saw those glistening trails. He felt as if he had stepped into something he wasn't meant to see. Throat tight, he drew up to his feet and scoured the room until he found what he was looking for: some sort of thin, black box. It was different to the one that man had. It only had a few choice symbols on the face of it, and looked as if they were buttons to be pressed. He threw out a careless hand and swept it off the side table. It hit the ground with a clatter.

On the bed, the man straightened in shock. His eyes swept through the room and snapped to him in an instant.

His expression twitched, recognition spilling into the depths of his eyes.

"...Binghe?!"

Luo Binghe stared at him, perplexed. The man spoke his name with such familiarity. He watched the man's dazed confusion shift into mortification. In an instant, a mask slid over the man's face and he straightened in his bed. The body language was familiar. Achingly familiar. Luo Binghe straightened his shoulders and narrowed his eyes. "How do you know me?"

His fingers ached to have any sort of weapon. Without his cultivation he felt so chillingly mortal. Though, the man in front of him was weak. It wouldn't take much to overpower him.

His bones probably would snap with the barest hint of pressure. Even without his cultivation, Luo Binghe was strong. (He had to keep reminding himself that.) He began to weigh his options in his mind: charm or threaten? This man had answers. He knew who Luo Binghe was, which meant he knew why Luo Binghe was brought here.

The man opened his mouth to answer, then stopped. He swallowed whatever he was about to say. One of his hands came up and pressed against his temple. “Are… are you real?”

Luo Binghe stilled, keeping his expression neutral and pleasant. *What?* What sort of question was that?

Unless...

When Shizun had di-

When Shen Qingqiu was-

Back in that alley, there was some sort of qi explosion. The sensation afterward was not unlike stepping through one of Xin Mo's portals, but *bigger.* There was the slight possibility that Luo Binghe was no where *near* Jin Lan City or even in the same *realm*. The thought sent a slight spark of fear into his chest, one that he quickly crushed. He would not give in to panic. This was just another obstacle. He would get back to his shizun, no matter where he was.

Luo Binghe let his head fall to one side. “This one would like to think so.”

Uncertain, the stranger shrank into himself. At some point he had cleaned his face of any evidence of tears, as if he hadn’t just been holding his broken heart in his hands. The switch was so fast, and so practiced. And so fucking familiar-

Oh.

Luo Binghe’s heart leapt into his throat. He took a few steps towards the bed, magnetized. His eyes scoured the stranger, curious. What he wore was highly inappropriate, nothing but a single thin layer of fabric. The sleeves were short, showing off delicate arms that had some bruising here and there. The collar of the top was too loose; painfully sharp collarbones jutted out beneath a long, slender neck.

The man turned his face away, thoughts churning like a massive storm in his eyes. His mouth opened and shut again, as if he was trying to come to terms with reality.

Cautious, Luo Binghe lifted a hand and laid it to rest over the stranger’s. The man jumped at the contact, and the peculiar device next to him started beeping faster. His hand was startlingly cold, like ice. “It appears this one is real,” Luo Binghe said. Without Xin Mo whispering into his mind, it was easier to keep calm.

Without a fan, Shen Qingqiu could only turn his face away as a blush rose up and colored his deathly pale cheeks. He stared out the window, blinking fast. “...why are you here…?”

It was without a doubt that this man was his shizun. Luo Binghe spent the better part of his life studying him, learning the subtle tweaks of his expressions in a desperate and hungry way to *know* him. Shizun kept so much behind his masks and his fans, it was far too difficult to pick apart who he was underneath. Though Luo Binghe had lived with him for *years*. He learned to read the soft tilt of Shen Qingqiu's lips. He was mesmerized by the grace that coated each and every single one of his shizun's movements. Even something as simple as picking up a dirtied dish was made into a spectacular art by this man.

He was no different now, trapped in the body of someone else, sitting in inappropriate clothing.

Luo Binghe wondered if his shizun knew he looked different. He had to, right? This body of his was so much smaller than his other, and so much weaker. Would he admit to Luo Binghe who he was? Luo Binghe's eyebrows tightened together. “This one finds his memories.. a bit fuzzy. Why are you here?”

“I’m ill,” Shen Qingqiu answered, unlike himself. His eyes became half-lidded with the weight of a lifetime of burdens.

Stomach twisting, Luo Binghe’s hand tightened over his shizun’s. “This one will seek a cure-”

“There is none,” Shen Qingqiu interrupted. His eyebrow pinched in pain and a slight breath sucked in through his soft lips. He glanced down at their joined hands for half a second.

It was enough to make Luo Binghe understand. He snapped back his hand immediately. Already he saw Shen Qingqiu’s flesh mottle in response to his tightened grip. His stomach sank. He had hardly exerted any pressure. Whatever curse had brought them here, it had greatly changed his shizun’s form, weakening him into a frail, mortal capsule. He needed answers. He wanted to scream and shake Shen Qingqiu, to force him to *fucking speak*.

Why are you acting as if you already understand what's going!?

Why won't you tell me anything?!

Luo Binghe could not wait for answers, and he knew better than to bombard and demand them. That had only led to... *this*. Whatever, wherever, *this* was. He decided to play dumb and see where that got him. “Does this young master know where we are?” He wondered if his shizun would correct him. He *wanted* his master to correct him.

There was no reaction. “Yes,” Shen Qingqiu said, keeping his head turned away from Luo Binghe. The short crop of hair on his head did nothing to hide his face. A blush had crept all the way up his neck, settling in his ears. As if remembering something, Shen Qingqiu sat up and threw a startled look at Luo Binghe. “We have to get out of here.”

“Are we in danger?” Luo Binghe asked, bracing himself for a fight.

“No.” Shen Qingqiu shook his head with a frown. “But they won’t let you spend the night, and you going off on your own sounds like a *terrible* idea.”

The reproach in his shizun's voice made Luo Binghe grin with glee. "Oh? Does this young master know this Binghe so well?" Any question that Shen Qingqiu did *not* know what was going on flew out the window. He was familiar with this place, and familiar with his disciple.

Shen Qingqiu went to answer with a huff, until his words stilled. He flattened his lips into a thin line. "Luo Binghe shouldn't wander off on his own."

Luo Binghe almost sighed. He ignored the sting of pain in his chest. Why did his shizun try to keep so many things to himself? No matter. Luo Binghe altered his initial plans. There was more than one way to try and get information. "Well," Luo Binghe smiled sweetly, reaching out to take Shen Qingqiu's hand. He ran his thumb over his knuckles. "This Binghe will trust in this young master to make certain he does not get lost."

It was a bold move that had his own heart spinning.

At any moment, his shizun would break. He would scorn Luo Binghe, and give himself away. Then-

"R-Right," Shen Qingqiu swallowed, then he added, "Shen Yuan."

What?

"Shen Yuan," Luo Binghe murmured. The name rolled around his tongue, and as he looked over his shizun he spotted the slightest piece of vulnerability in his eyes. It wasn't the type of look a liar had when they came up with a name. It was... the truth. Luo Binghe's heart started roaring in his ears. This was the *closest* he had ever gotten to getting any semblance of truth about his shizun's past. Could... this be it? Still, Luo Binghe could not resist the urge to get back at his shizun for *withholding* his identity. So, he added, "Yuan-gege."

With a jolt, Shen Yuan threw Luo Binghe a wide-eyed, embarrassed look. "*Binghe!"* He scorned.

It was *delicious* to be under that reprimanding gaze again. Luo Binghe couldn't stop his grin, or the near giggle that followed after it. "What?" He asked, blinking innocently at Shen Yuan.

"You're probably older than I am," Shen Yuan mustered, his eyes falling to the side again. His shoulders curled ever so slightly. It seemed without a fan, Shen Yuan liked to sink into himself.

Luo Binghe resolved to find him a fan sooner rather than later. "But Yuan-gege seems so much more mature and well learned than this Binghe..." He thought aloud, keeping his voice innocent and light. It might be cruel, but until Shen Yuan told Luo Binghe who he was, he was *not* going to go easy on him.

With a heavy breath and dark blush, Shen Yuan waved Luo Binghe away. "The nurses will need to come in before they'll discharge me. Go sit down. It won't take too long." Under his breath he added, "Hopefully."

Chapter End Notes

next: into the modern world!! surely nothing could go wrong, right? not with yuan-gege here to protect this binghe! <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Only roughly 3,600 words this time, which would be closer to a 18 minute reading time.

There's some silly shenanigans in this one.

CW: Generic hospital trip, chronic pain and illness, over-stimulation (not in the sex way... the neurospicy way.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took far longer than Shen Yuan wanted to get out of there. Out of the corner of his eye, he kept a watch on Luo Binghe when the nurses first flooded into the room. His sharp attention was not missed, and Luo Binghe kept flashing… flirty? Smiles?? At *Shen Yuan??*

No. Shen Yuan had to be misinterpreting those smiles! It made more sense to think that Luo Binghe was overwhelmed and nervous, and maybe that's why his smiles looked weird?

Whatever. The *important* fact was that the nurses actually saw Luo Binghe. (One point towards not being insane. Woo!) At first there was a slight tension in the room. Luo Binghe was a cutting silhouette; one that screamed "rebellious" and "dangerous." The nurses weren't quite sure what to make of him. All it took was a big smile and a few well-placed words for Luo Binghe to be immediately swept into the good grace and care of the nurses. It was embarrassing. They all had known Shen Yuan since he was young, so they had the audacity to be relentless in their teasing.

"He never brings anyone around!"

"Finally we know that our little Shen Yuan *can* make friends!"

"Such a handsome young man too!"

Shen Yuan spent the rest of the time trying to mitigate his own humiliation, and to make sure that Luo Binghe did not give away that he wasn't even from this fucking world!!!

The beginnings of a headache started to inch around his skull.

He had to get the *protagonist* back into his own story before–

Before… what?

The story would collapse, wouldn't it?

Worry stung his chest as he thought of Liu Qingge, and everyone else whose lives would end if he didn't figure out how to fix this. First things first: get Luo Binghe back to his apartment.

Not, uh, like that!

He had to get Luo Binghe somewhere *safe* before he did something that got them *both* carted off to prison or some mental institution.

Ugh.

Right as the last nurse was preparing to leave the room, she leaned in close to Shen Yuan and said in a loud whisper, "Your boyfriend is very polite!"

Shen Yuan might have died for a third time. (The first, of course, being his transmigration into Shen Qingqiu, and the second being the transmigration back *into* his own body.) He sputtered.

With a laugh, the nurse patted him on his head. "Don't worry, we've been hedging bets for a while. Glad I finally get to collect!"

Bets!? On what!?

Before Shen Yuan could clear up any misunderstanding, the nurse vacated the room. He very studiously ignored any curious glances from Luo Binghe. He swept the blankets aside and scooted off the bed. It was odd being in this body again. The weakness in his limbs was foreign. He had long since forgotten what it was like to compensate for the constant slight pulses of pain, along with the dizziness that often trailed after him.

It might have been a slight blessing. He looked *nothing* like Shen Qingqiu, which meant at least in this world he hadn't earned Luo Binghe's scorn! All he had to do was not give away the fact that he was a transmigrator, and then he could get Luo Binghe back to his world! He had to admit what a relief it was to have his little sheep back on his side. His hand wrapped around a cane, and he used it to stand.

Questions burned in Luo Binghe's eyes, but he did not ask any aloud. He waited, patient and quiet, for Shen Yuan to gather his things.

After a change of clothes and several different written forms and verbal assurances, *Yes, I'm fine. Staying here any longer won't change anything,* he and Luo Binghe were able to step out of the hospital.

Had he been any other patient, if they hadn't known him for as long as they did, they might have fought harder to keep him.

But he was the spoiled son of a rich family who spent enough time at the hospital for it to be a second home.

His attention drifted towards the man at this side. It was odd seeing Luo Binghe here. He was made for a world with monsters and swords and magic. Yet here he stood, almost… normal. Well. Not too normal. People kept throwing looks at him as if he were a celebrity. He didn't seem to notice. As soon as they hit the pandemonium of the outside world, walking the streets, Luo Binghe's eyes fell into a slight squint.

The life of a city grew around them, like a discordant band that kept adding in more instruments. It smelled. It was noisy. Cars honked, buses screeched, and sirens constantly screamed in the distance. And there were people. So many people.

"Stay close," Shen Yuan told Luo Binghe.

A hand wrapped around his, and he felt heat crawl up his cheeks. Ugh! He never thought he'd miss another man's body. Shen Qingqiu never managed to blush this much!

Looking as innocent as ever, Luo Binghe smiled at him. "This way, I won't lose Yuan-gege!"

Shen Yuan considered stepping out in front of one of the many fast cars. He barely restrained himself. *I'm doing this for you, PIDW!!* He held back the urge to pull up his hood and disappear into it. Instead, he led Luo Binghe down the street. "It's a few blocks to the train," he told him. "Then it will be about a forty minute ride."

"Mn."

That was a slightly strained response, unlike Luo Binghe. Eyebrows falling together, Shen Yuan dared a glance at the man beside him. His disciple caught his eye, and quickly smoothed out his face to flash him a warm smile. Not for the first time, he wondered why Luo Binghe was okay with all of this. He had just been transported into another world, and he hadn't even bothered to ask Shen Yuan anything other than his first few questions.

Normal people would be freaking out.

Maybe Luo Binghe assumed it all was a dream?

(Was it?)

They stood at a crosswalk, waiting as a crowd of people gathered. Shen Yuan leaned against his cane. He watched his disciple out of the corner of his eye.

Sweat began to glisten on Luo Binghe's forehead. His eyes fell into another squint, with his eyebrows collapsing together. Someone bumped into Luo Binghe's side, and he shot them a glare that made Shen Yuan's heart jump in fear. *Ah, there is the black lotus!*

The light changed, and Shen Yuan guided them across.

Luo Binghe kept his head down, eyes slightly shut. He didn't take in the advertisements, the people, the technology, or *anything*.

That's when it clicked for Shen Yuan.

Ah, my poor little sheep! This master understands now!

He guided Luo Binghe to an alcove between buildings. “Hold this,” he told him, passing over the cane, as he swung off his backpack and dropped it to the ground. Crouching, he began to dig through it. There weren't too many things in here – it was his hospital bag. It had money, some identification, an extra jacket because he was always cold, and–

There!

Triumphant, Shen Yuan pulled out his prize. He straightened up, and started to say, “I have-” A wave of dizziness crashed over him.

Luo Binghe’s hand snapped out to steady him.

Flustered, Shen Yuan cleared his throat. “I have these for you. They’ll help.” He held up his offering.

“Yuan-gege is so thoughtful,” Luo Binghe said with a sugary sweet smile. “This one… finds himself lacking education on what these are.”

How does someone even begin to explain overstimulation to an overpowered half-demon protagonist? It only makes sense that there would be too much going on for Luo Binghe in the city!! It was a lot for Shen Yuan, and he grew up here! “Here,” Shen Yuan said, deftly ignoring the ever persistent use of ‘gege,’ “can I?”

Luo Binghe hummed his assent.

“Bend down then,” Shen Yuan said with slight scorn. The man was a giant. So!! Unfair!!! Shen Yuan hadn’t realized how tall Shen Qingqiu had been, not until he was stuck like this again! His height had never bothered him. At least not until he was standing in front of a god-like protagonist that was as tall as a skyscraper.

A pleased smile filled Luo Binghe’s lips. This one was more real than the last. (How did Shen Yuan know that?) “This one will do whatever Yuan-gege asks of him.” His eyes fluttered coyly.

Why did that sound so suggestive!?

Binghe!!

Clearing his throat, Shen Yuan tugged up the hood of Luo Binghe’s jacket. Embarrassingly, he had to gather Luo Binghe’s hair and pull it to the side, and his hand trailed across the back of Luo Binghe’s neck. Did he just shiver? Shen Yuan supposed his hands were cold. His sister always complained that they were, at least. With the hood up, he turned on the headphones and placed them over Luo Binghe’s head. He connected them to his phone and pulled up some soothing guqin playlist.

Almost instantly, Luo Binghe’s shoulders relaxed. His smile loosened. “Yuan-gege takes good care of this Binghe.”

Not wanting to shout over the music, Shen Yuan pulled up a writing app on his phone and hastily wrote out, “Just a little bit more to the train. If the music is too loud, just tap my shoulder.”

With fascination, Luo Binghe looked down at the screen. He glanced up into Shen Yuan’s eyes. Warmth filled his expression, and he nodded.

What are you doing, smiling like that at a complete stranger!?

Shen Yuan ducked his head before his blush could finish forming, and he took back his cane. This time, he held out his free hand and waited for Luo Binghe to take it before he guided him back down the street.

This was fine.

It was *fine.*

He tried telling his heart that as it bounced around his ribs like an eager puppy. *Stop that!*

All of this was a minor setback. Whatever it was. He would get Luo Binghe back to his world, and…

There was no use thinking about what would happen after. He needed to worry about right now. Like getting Luo Binghe back to his… apartment. Why did that seem like the only safe option!?

Going to a hotel seemed worse!

Not before long, they made it to the station, and waited for the next train. With the headphones secure on his head, Luo Binghe gave in to his interest and looked all around him. Even with his hood up, he still drew many eyes.

Shen Yuan saw more than a few people casting curious eyes towards him and… their joined hands.

His heart began to bounce around again. He dutifully ignored it.

The train arrived, and they followed a crowd in. Luo Binghe’s hand tightened around his own. With a hum, Shen Yuan let his cane hang off his arm as he reached over to pat consolingly on Luo Binghe’s arm. They made it into the packed car.

After a bit of elbowing and maneuvering, Shen Yuan got Luo Binghe next to the window, with no one else around them. He stood as a wall between his disciple and the crowd. Not that he was much of a wall. The train called overhead in warning. Shen Yuan dropped Luo Binghe’s hand to catch on to a pole.

The train set off. Startled, Luo Binghe caught on to Shen Yuan. One hand caught on to his shoulder, and the other on his waist.

Their eyes met.

“Sorry,” Shen Yuan mouthed. “I should have warned you.” He moved one of Luo Binghe’s hands to the pole, and patted his forearm consolingly.

Something tender spilled into the darks of Luo Binghe’s eyes.

Clearing his throat, Shen Yuan dropped his gaze. With his cane hooked on his arm, he pointedly started scrolling on his phone. One of Luo Binghe’s hands stayed on his waist. He tried not to focus on it. Luo Binghe just needed some stability! Something to ground him in this new and frightening world. That’s all it was. Or maybe he thought Shen Yuan might fall? He found himself flipping between the same two apps before he realized that he didn’t even know what to do with this thing anymore. All the muscle memory he had for it – pulling up forums, scrolling blogs, so on so forth – had erased over the time he spent as a-

Did that really happen?

His lips pursed. He had a ridiculous urge to make sure that Luo Binghe was real and wanted to ask him if he even *remembered* another world. His eyes lifted from the phone. To his shock, Luo Binghe was watching him.

Heat scorched his skin.

Why??? There is! So many things to see! Even a window! I got you a window!!

Luo Binghe held out his hand. (It was the hand holding on to the pole – not the one on Shen Yuan’s waist. Huh.)

Curious, Shen Yuan dropped the phone into his palm.

Luo Binghe, ever the quick learner, began manipulating the items on the screen. After a few stumbling moments, he managed to find the note app. His eyes lit up in triumph as he fumbled over the keyboard. In a few short moments, he wrote, *Does Yuan-gege have more sound options?*

When he passed the phone back to Shen Yuan, their hands brushed. It was ridiculous for Shen Yuan’s heart to jump. They had been holding hands before! He considered the question, before venturing, *I have some playlists.* He paused, and deleted it before writing, *There are songs that are very different to the ones you are used to. Want to give some a try?*

Luo Binghe considered, again their hands brushing, as he wrote back, *Are these songs that Yuan-gege likes?*

Shen Yuan nodded.

A smile filled Luo Binghe’s lips, and he nodded eagerly.

They spent some time diving through some of Shen Yuan’s playlists. It should have been boring, standing in silence as he queued up songs for someone else to listen to. Though he had an immense amount of satisfaction watching Luo Binghe react to the music. He hadn't realized how close the two of them had drifted, not until he felt Luo Binghe's breath tickle his forehead as he huffed a slight laugh. (The current song was meant to be humorous; it was

about a date who had a very questionable fascination with a certain grotesque horror film.) Shen Yuan tried to take half a step back, to put more space between the two of them.

He should have been paying attention. At the same time, a flood of new passengers spilled into their car. A large back-pack collided with Shen Yuan, and he bit back a surprised yelp. He fell. Arms caught him, and he was folded into the safety of Luo Binghe's strong hold. He did not see the dark, almost murderous glance that Luo Binghe shot the man with a large backpack. At the moment, Shen Yuan was a little preoccupied.

Oh, no.

Shen Yuan had never been held like this before – as if he were something precious that needed to be tenderly protected.

Warmth surrounded him. It was comforting, and smelled *really good.* He could have melted. Luo Binghe, with the gentlest touch and care, moved the two of them so that Shen Yuan's back rested against the window. He lifted one arm to box Shen Yuan in, hand resting right next to his head, and used his own body to shield Shen Yuan from the rest of the crowded train. His eyes swept down over Shen Yuan's face, and he pulled off the headphones. "Yuan-gege?"

"Mn?" Shen Yuan did not trust his voice. His heart took up too much space in his throat. He knew he was blushing.

Didn't Luo Binghe know that this was a *classic* romantic cliche!? What was he doing!?? It wasn't even the right world!! He had over six hundred maidens waiting for his return in PIDW!

"Are you alright?" Luo Binghe searched his eyes.

"Yes," Shen Yuan croaked. He knew he shouldn't trust his voice! Ah, how embarrassing. It cracked! Anyone would react like that, if they had such a handsome face in front of them!

Unconvinced, Luo Binghe frowned. The hand that wasn't boxing Shen Yuan in lowered to hold Shen Yuan's waist, steadying him as the train rocked back and forth.

He was quite steady, thank-you!

Shen Yuan cleared his throat, placing a hand over the one on his waist, "No need. This m-"

Shit.

He almost fell back into Shen Qingqiu's diction!

Stuttering, Shen Yuan corrected, "I-I am fine! Just normal train things. Now stop fussing, hm?" He tugged away Luo Binghe's hand and shot him a warning glance. "I'm not going to collapse." Well, there had been several times in Shen Yuan's life when he *had* collapsed, but for the sake of this argument he wasn't going to bring them up.

Almost as if he were pleased to be disciplined, Luo Binghe grinned. The now freed hand rested on the other side of Shen Yuan's head. His eyes darkened and he leaned in close. "If Yuan-gege says so."

Shen Yuan could not back up anymore. There was a *window* preventing him from doing that! He refused to back down, setting his jaw and raising his chin to narrow his eyes at Luo Binghe. He wished he had a fan to hit his disciple!

Ah. Wait.

Their faces were too close!

Far, far too close! To anyone else, it might look like they were going to kiss!

It was at that exact moment that the train jerked, and someone collided into Luo Binghe's back. Shock widened Luo Binghe's eyes, and he fell forward. Their faces crashed, noses smashing together. A strangled noise slipped from Luo Binghe, and he stumbled half a step forward. Shen Yuan went from being boxed in to being *pinned* against the window.

And...

And!?

Kiss-?

Shen Yuan threw his hands out and attempted to shove Luo Binghe back. The man was solid as stone. He turned his face away, skin hot. There was far too much of Luo Binghe on him. One leg was between his own, and-

"B-Binghe!"

Another small noise left Luo Binghe. He managed to move just enough to pull their faces back. Luo Binghe was... blushing!? "This-" he choked.

"No matter!" Shen Yuan admonished, too horrified to hear Luo Binghe *bring up* what just happened! It!! Did *not* happen! Thank you!

The train rocked again. Luo Binghe was forced to lean against his forearms, still mostly pinning Shen Yuan. Heat kindled in Shen Yuan. It had to be because Luo Binghe was so warm. And the embarrassment of having him so close. Ah. Luo Binghe was quite muscular, wasn't he? And warm. He smelled nice. Did he exist in this world before, and find Shen Yuan? Or did he wake up in that hospital room? How come no one questioned the fact that a random man was in his room?

His father had even mentioned a friend, didn't he...?

"D-Did you," Shen Yuan spoke, his voice cracking. He was determined to ignore their current situation. "Did you just wake up in the hospital room?" He refused to look into Luo Binghe's eyes.

It took a bit for Luo Binghe to answer. He shifted. His thighs slid against Shen Yuan's hips. "I-" He cleared his throat. "Yes, this one woke up and-" Right as he moved back half an inch, someone moved and shoved Luo Binghe back against him.

The movement was worse!

It was *worse!*

"Binghe."

"I-I am sorry," Luo Binghe gasped into his ear.

Oh, *no.*

Never mind. *That* was the worst. Shen Yuan, at some point, had covered up Luo Binghe's mouth with his hand. It was to preserve *both* of their dignities! "Binghe," Shen Yuan said, forcing his voice to be low and calm. "It's fine. You're fine. It's just a few more stops, alright?" *We can get through this, Binghe!* It must be disorienting to be stuck in such a strange situation with a complete stranger. His heart sank.

Luo Binghe blinked a few times down at him. The shy embarrassment melted off his face, and he watched Shen Yuan with warmth in his eyes. He nodded once.

"I'm sorry," Shen Yuan told him. "I should have called a car. There's nothing to be done about it now. Just do what you need to get comfortable." He reached up and replaced the headphones back on Luo Binghe's head. "I understand."

"Sh..." Luo Binghe stumbled over his words, his eyes watering. His lips pulled into a thin line, and he nodded. After a few moments of contemplation, he managed to shift them into a different position. He leaned over, forearm braced above their heads, with his head resting on Shen Yuan's shoulder.

With a sigh, and definitely no smile, Shen Yuan consolingly patted Luo Binghe's back. *Dry those tears, little sheep!* They stayed like that for the rest of the trip, Luo Binghe braced well enough to not get jostled into Shen Yuan any further. It was close, but not as uncomfortable as it should have been. Shen Yuan ignored the little worm in his heart that told him that it might have been *really nice* to be protected and warm on the train. He ignored how soft Luo Binghe's hair was on his cheek. He ignored the way his heart crawled up his throat. Instead, he continued to pick songs for Luo Binghe, sometimes feeling his breath spill over his neck.

It was...

Maybe, just maybe, it wasn't the *worst* experience ever.

We'll be back at my apartment soon, Binghe! I promise!

Shen Yuan definitely did not think about what would happen once they finally got there.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapter might be a bit short... i am playing around with the idea of posting two next week. we'll see where it goes!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Roughly 2,000 words this time, which would be closer to a 10 minute reading time.

That's a cool room you got there, Yuan-gege!

CW: Over-stimulation (not in the sex way... the neurospicy way.) Mental breakdown, maybe? As a treat.

Luo Binghe had to reserve every single last drop of restraint to *not* brush his fingers over his lips. It was quick, and absolutely an accident. That didn't matter to him. It was his first kiss. His heart was causing havoc in his chest, and he wondered if his shizun could hear it. The two of them were close enough that all Luo Binghe could smell was him.

There had been a turning point in Luo Binghe's life when he had started seeing his shizun as someone other than an untouchable immortal god. Though he could not pinpoint the exact moment he fell in love. It felt more like an inevitability, rather than a single event or moment. It was like the slow growth of a tree, from a sapling to a massive tower filling up with branches and leaves. Something you didn't even notice until one day you looked out your window and the tree blocked your view.

Luo Binghe ached.

Standing this close to his shizun was a dream. Even his younger self barely dared to even *fantasize* about what it might be like to be this close. Though Luo Binghe was greedy.

He wanted to be closer.

Then the train ride was over.

Whatever little bubble he had created with Shen Yuan popped, and the real world came barreling in. He knew he should be paying more attention to his surroundings. If he and Shen Yuan were separated, he would be helpless. There were *hundreds* of people – it was overwhelming, loud, and smelly. It reminded him vaguely of the Immortal Alliance Conference. Though, a hundred times worse. His hands twitched with unease. Not even Jin Lan City, in the midst of a plague, was this bad.

Even with the device Shen Yuan gave him, his headache was quietly persistent. He had no cultivation to banish it.

People brushed past them, and shot them looks as if they were ones in the way. More than anything, Luo Binghe wanted to lay down. It was too much. He was slightly overwhelmed by all the different magics and strange lights and screens. The only thing that grounded him was his shizun holding on to his hand, and every now and then he would reach over and pat his arm. Every single touch was a blessing.

If Shizun touched him so willingly and comfortingly now, maybe he wasn't disgusted by Luo Binghe?

There was a slight whisper of hope in Luo Binghe's chest. Maybe… maybe he had misunderstood at the Immortal Conference.

The words his shizun had said – those replayed in his mind. The moment had replayed enough times in his nightmares, before he gained enough control over his dreams to banish them. What had he done wrong?

His shizun said…

He *said-*

Before long, they stepped inside a building. All the bright lights and sounds muted into one tightly controlled space. A sigh of relief escaped Luo Binghe. With his free hand, he reached up to pull off the device and let his hood fall back. They stepped through another threshold, and someone greeted Shen Yuan.

The two shared a polite conversation. Luo Binghe guessed the woman who supervised the entryway was some sort of guard. She asked about Shen Yuan's health.

With the expertise of someone being asked that same question thousands of times, Shen Yuan moved past it, and the conversation remained civil and distant.

Not before long, Shen Yuan made his escape with Luo Binghe. The entry way of the building held lavish ornamentation, with a fountain and a seating area. On the far wall sat several pairs of closed doors, each with a button beside it. There, Shen Yuan pushed one of the buttons and turned to Luo Binghe. "This will open to… a room that can move."

"Move?" Luo Binghue asked, staring towards one of the doors that dinged. Moments later, the doors pulled open to reveal a crisp, vacant room. His eyes traced around it, trying to figure out how it could move. Would it be some sort of array?

"Yes. It is extremely safe, but I don't want to…" Shen Yuan was trying to form his words to not say, "*scare you."*

Luo Binghe smiled. "If this Binghe gets scared, he will just hold on to his Yuan-gege, hm?"

His shizun's skin colored brilliantly as his face fell into a well-practiced neutral expression. Did Shen Yuan blush this much normally? Luo Binghe examined his expression, looking for

tells so he might be able to read it in his shizun's other face.

"Alright." Shen Yuan stepped into the room with a click of his cane. He seemed to momentarily forget they were holding hands, and instead of freeing his hand from Luo Binghe's, he hooked his cane on his arm again and pressed a code into the buttons on the wall. The doors slid into place, blocking them into the small room.

Then it moved.

It was a strange sensation, making Luo Binghe's stomach swoop. He wasn't necessarily scared, but he squeezed Shen Yuan's hand anyway. As he hoped, his shizun's hand, the one that normally held the cane, rested on his arm and patted him in a reassuring manner.

Why was Shizun being so nice, masquerading as someone else?

If he had wanted to be rid of Luo Binghe, it would have been easy for him to act as if he didn't know him. Luo Binghe would have left on his own accord, to figure out where that strange entity sent him. Instead Shen Yuan took responsibility for him, and was even being considerate and kind.

He had a burning urge to grab his shizun's shoulders and shake him, and demand answers. Instead, he let this game continue to play.

When the doors opened, Shen Yuan took hold of his cane and guided them a few steps down the hall. Even in a different world, Luo Binghe recognized wealth when he saw it. The hallway was decorated with cold, sharp lines. Everything was painstakingly clean and well polished. Each step echoed around them. Large paintings ate up parts of the walls. Paintings that looked more like someone just spilled ink.

Shen Yuan led him to the very end of the hall. There, an unassuming door sat. He pressed his little black box against some sort of pad on the wall, and the door unlocked.

The two stepped into a sterile, clean space. Straight ahead of them, the far wall was made entirely of glass. Beyond, the city stretched endlessly into the horizon. There was a large sitting area, a dining table, and what could only be a kitchen. There were a few doors, one that looked like it led into some sort of bathroom, a strange room decorated with tons of colorful things, and a bedroom.

"Alright," Shen Yuan looked around them. "I'll…" His eyes fell to the strange room. All at once, he stiffened. Color flooded his face. "I need to deal… with something." He stepped away from Luo Binghe, attempting a calm retreat towards the room. "Do *not* move!" he said, and dove into the room. The door clicked shut behind him.

Luo Binghe probably would have listened to his shizun, before he threw him into the Abyss. He was obviously hiding something.

With a smirk, Luo Binghe drew towards that closed door. He pressed his ear against it, not disrespectful enough to immediately barge in. After he made certain that the noises he heard

on the other side wasn't Shen Yuan undressing or anything else untoward, he eased the door open.

A desk ate up an entire wall of the room, with multiple blackened glass hanging on stands. Against a window, a well-cushioned couch sat with tall bookshelves surrounding it and eating up most of the wall space. What shelves weren't cramped full of books were stuffed full of small dolls and knickknacks. The wall space was covered with paintings.

Luo Binghe stopped when he saw his own face reflected back at him. In some cases, the resemblance was a thin thread, with only his dark robes and demon sigil to tie the person in the painting to him. In other cases, it was startlingly accurate.

A gasp escaped Shen Yuan. He was plucking a framed painting off the wall, and he nearly dropped it in his startlement. "*Binghe!"* he cried.

Luo Binghe stood, stupefied.

There was a replica of Xin Mo on the wall.

One of the paintings showed Luo Binghe as a child, surrounded by Shen Qingqiu, Shu Hualing, and demons from the demon invasion. All were sneering. A strange sensation shifted through his stomach. It was almost like the realization that something had been watching him in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to jump out.

"What is this?" Luo Binghe asked, his eyes jumping from painting to painting. There was a painting of Vanishing Stalk Lily Tiger, a very rare, dangerous, and beautiful foe. And there, one of him much older… on some type of throne? His eyes landed on one of the small dolls. Really, with their quality, they were more akin to miniature statues. He drew across the room to the shelves.

There were versions of himself, versions of others within the Cang Qiong Sect — and a few dozen monsters and demons. A ton of them, in fact. The creatures took up more space than the people did.

"Binghe."

Of course, there were other statues and things he did not know or recognize. Those were grouped differently than the ones from his own world.

"Luo Binghe…?"

He stopped in front of another painting. This one showed a version of him facing off against the monsters of the Abyss. It… *was* the Abyss. In the painting, he was bloodied and feral, claws out with his fangs glinting in the low light. Why did his shizun have this? Each beat of his heart rang in his chest. "…is this why?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Why…?" Shen Yuan asked him.

"Is this why you shoved me into the Abyss?"

Eyes widening, Shen Yuan fell back. At some point he had started trekking across the room, hand up as if to placate Luo Binghe. Now his skin was pale. Fear filled his eyes as he scrambled back, with the intent to escape through the door.

Luo Binghe sighed.

Then he shot across the room. He couldn't afford Shen Yuan to leave him; not here in this world where it would be so terrifyingly easy to lose him.

Shen Yuan did not make it far.

It was a mirror of that night that started this all: Shen Qingqiu running through the streets of Jin Lang City. Except Shen Yuan barely escaped the room before Luo Binghe caught him. He kept his hold gentle, wrapped delicately around Shen Yuan's wrist. He tugged him back inside the room, and let the door shut. "Shizun," Luo Binghe murmured.

Shen Yuan flinched. His back pressed up against the door, with Luo Binghe standing over him. His arms created almost a frame around Shen Yuan's head. In this form, his shizun was startlingly small. He was so unlike the Immortal Peak Lord. He was brittle and fragile, and still so *terrified* of Luo Binghe. It hurt.

His heart was a tangled mess of thorns and shards of glass.

Frustration and pain boiled in Luo Binghe. Tears burned his eyes. He didn't understand. Every single part of him wanted to grab on to Shen Yuan and scream and demand answers: *why, why, why!?* Without Xin Mo, it was easier to ignore the darker thoughts. His eyes fell shut, and he breathed in through his nose. Slowly, he sank to his knees and held Shen Yuan's hand to his forehead. "*Shizun, please,"* he whispered. The tip of his nose burned, and his voice was thick and wet.

"Binghe…?" Shen Yuan asked. After a few moments, his other hand settled atop Luo Binghe's hair.

"Why does Shizun think this disciple would…" Luo Binghe stopped, the words tightening in his throat. *Why does Shizun think this disciple would hurt him?* He already knew that answer. It's because Luo Bighe already did. He had chased his shizun, slammed him into a wall, and *forced him* to consume his blood. Then he attacked that entity connected to Shizun. It was because of him they were here. Tears filled his throat and his head bowed. Guilt and self-loathing choked him. He let go of Shen Yuan. He was everything his shizun had hated.

And he had the *audacity* to believe that he might someday earn to be beside his shizun again?

When this is where his effort brought them?

A strange noise left Shen Yuan.

Luo Binghe pulled back.

Blood spilled Shen Yuan – from his eyes, his nose, his mouth, *everywhere.* That small sound was *agonized.*

“Shizun!?” Luo Binghe cried.

Power surged around them once again.

Everything turned dark.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Roughly 2,000 words this time, which would be closer to a 10 minute reading time.

Guess who finally shows up!? Teehee..

CW: Shen Qingqiu doesn't have a good time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There was nothing left to fight, and that was annoying. Liu Qingge preferred problems that he could physically cut down, not ones where he was left to sit and observe and be a nuisance. Frustrated, he ground his teeth. He stood in vigil over Shen Qingqiu's body, glaring down at it as if by pure intimidation he might get his shixiong to wake up. He wasn't even the one that found the two of them – that brat of a disciple and Shen Qingqiu. But he *was* the one to tear through a few Huan Hua disciples to stop them from *stealing* Shen Qingqiu, under the pretense that he *harmed* Luo Binghe. As if?!

After rescuing Shen Qingqiu and bringing him back to the Jin Zi Weapons Shop, there was nothing left for him to do. Other than stand around like an ass and glare down at his shixiong.

Mu Qingfang tolerated his presence. He floated around the space in a controlled frenzy, splitting his time between finding a cure for the sower's bullshit and trying to figure out whatever bullshit happened to Shen Qingqiu.

At this point, Liu Qingge was seriously considering tying some sort of leash around his shixiong to keep him out of trouble. His gut twisted uncomfortably as he remembered what he told his shixiong: *Don't be a nuisance.*

As it turned out, if Liu Qingge didn't stay near, Shen Qingqiu would find ways to turn the world upside-down and get himself killed.

In this case, he found his revived disciple, and created a qi explosion so big that it nearly toppled two buildings. Mu Qingfang assured him that it was *not* a qi deviation.

Luo Binghe should be dead. Instead, that brat of a disciple, annoyingly, managed to catch *more* sower than Liu Qingge. Then after catching *more* sower, he had enough time to waltz through the city and somehow cause chaos with Shen Qingqiu.

Was he annoyed?

Obviously not.

It's fine that a *disciple* managed to capture more sowers and out-do him.

It's perfectly fine.

It's so totally fine that Liu Qingge wasn't even thinking about it anymore.

Not at all.

Nope!

His not-thinking-about-losing was gravely interrupted by a scream.

Everyone in the weapons shop paused to figure out where it was coming from.

The scream was raw and unfiltered – the type of noise that Liu Qingge only ever heard once before. It was when he came across a half-consumed victim of some type of slow-devouring beast. The victim had no chance of living. They had nothing left inside of them but pain. Hearing that sound ripped straight through Liu Qingge's heart, and sucker-punched all the air from his lungs.

It was Shen Qingqiu.

Shen Qingqiu was screaming.

His shixiong was in utter and complete *agony.*

Liu Qingge moved before he knew what he was doing. He caught Shen Qingqiu in his hands, and was holding his shoulders tight. The scream was *awful.* His shixiong didn't make sounds like that. Nothing was allowed to even *touch* his shixiong. Not once had Shen Qingqiu even *winced* before.

Awareness trickled into Shen Qingqiu. His mouth snapped shut, and his eyes peeled open. He stared up at Liu Qingge, swallowing the rest of the scream. It sank into a whimper, before cutting off into a wet gasp. His eyes glistened.

He was still in pain.

He simply was holding it all back.

He was holding it all back. How did someone learn to conceal *that* much pain? *Why* would someone hide it? How many times had Shen Qingqiu been hurt, and simply *hid* it?

"Mu Qingfang!!!" Liu Qingge shouted.

"I am here, I am *here!"* Mu Qingfang snapped. He snatched one of Shen Qingqiu's wrists and checked his meridians. Confusion filled his eyes.

That wasn't okay. Mu Qingfang needed to fix this now.

"Fix him!" Liu Qingge demanded.

Mu Qingfang did not respond. The only sign he heard was the irritated twitch of an eyebrow.

"B-B…" Shen Qingqiu tried to speak.

Blood dribbled from his mouth.

Liu Qingge wanted to punch something. Himself, maybe. Mu Qingfang more likely.

Excruciating agony shined in Shen Qingqiu's eyes, even as he tried to tamp it down. His entire body shuddered. Tears began to build in the corners of his eyes. He kept glancing slightly to the left, as if seeing something there. He was dying. He had to be dying.

"Binghe!" Shen Qingqiu groaned through bloodied teeth.

"What did that little beast do?!" Liu Qingge was one second away from tearing down a wall, or an entire building. He hated there was *nothing* he could do.

A pained noise escaped from the back of Shen Qingqiu's throat and he shook his head. He tried to speak again, the words broken and disorganized. "Need," he said, more blood slipping from his mouth, "him. Here."

Mu Qingfang straightened. "A curse?"

Shen Qingqiu nodded.

Before anyone else could even blink, Liu Qingge was gone.

Fear was worse than anger. Anger was easy. It stoked warmth into his veins, it shielded him from pain, and it helped keep him alive. This — whatever *this* was — it was the worst thing Liu Qingge had ever felt. He hadn't felt this useless, this *weak,* in years. He was surprised as he flew over the city to find tracks of liquid slipping down his cheeks.

Many liked to think so, but he wasn't stupid. He never said much, and acted decisively and often quickly, which led others to think him a dunce. He was not. The problem was he thought *too* much.

And right now he knew why his face was wet. For once he did not want to think. He wanted blinding rage to wipe his mind clean. He wanted the clarity of something to defeat and kill. Instead all he had was Shen Qingqiu's scream echoing in his mind, replaying again and

again. By the time he made it to the temporary housing of the Huan Hua Palace, he was shaking. Someone attempted to stop him, and he nearly cut them in half. He gave them a sharp glance, and they fell backwards two steps.

“Luo Binghe.” It’s all he said.

The cultivator didn’t answer.

Jaw tight, Liu Qingge burst into the building. He stomped through the hallway, shoving back figures as they stepped out in his way. “*Luo Binghe!”* He raged.

“You can’t just-“ someone protested.

With a single flick of his wrist, they flew through a door with a loud crash.

“Luo!” Liu Qingge shouted, accentuating it by kicking a door open, “*Binghe!”*

“How dare you!” Someone snapped at him.

Oh, Liu Qingge *dared.* He would tear this entire building down. He would beat up every single last *person* if they didn’t tell him where-

“Liu Qingge,” a dangerous voice called at the end of the hall. “Are you so familiar with this Binghe?”

Twisting around, Liu Qingge breathed out through his nose. He was still shaking. “What.”

In a doorway, Luo Binghe adjusted his robes and finished tying his belt. His hair was a wild mane around his shoulders, frizzy and unbrushed. His eyes had a dazed, almost sleepy look to them. There were some other cultivators behind him. Healers? “Calling me ‘Binghe,’” the brat said with a bright, charming smile that held the barest hint of animosity.

Liu Qingge gripped the hilt of his sword until his fingers creaked. He must have only heard the end of his last shout, or he was aggravating Liu Qingge on purpose. With that stupid ass smile, there was no question that it was the latter. He ignored him, and drew a few steps to him. “He needs you.”

The smile on Luo Binghe’s face dimmed. “Where?”

He didn’t have to ask *who.* They both knew *who.*

Good.

Liu Qingge raced to Luo Binghe.

Other cultivators cried out, reaching for their swords.

There was no reaction from Luo Binghe. He didn’t even flinch, the smile on his face disappearing into something wretched and pained. Liu Qingge caught his arm, and hauled

him outside. He didn't think. Cheng Luan was under his feet, and his arm was tight around Luo Binghe, and they flew.

"What happened?" Luo Binghe demanded as soon as they were in the air.

The wind roared, and Liu Qingge wished he would stop shaking because there was no way that the brat couldn't feel it. He hated fear. His teeth chattered.

"Liu Qingge," Luo Binghe demanded.

It wasn't until hands tightened around his hips that Liu Qingge became very aware of their proximity and how had essentially *manhandled* the little brat onto a sword, and hadn't even paused to consider that Luo Binghe could *fly on his own.* It was too late. "Let go," Liu Qingge demanded.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe pleaded.

At the sudden use of the title, Liu Qingge glanced over his shoulder.

Was… Luo Binghe *pouting?*

Shameless!

Ignoring him, Liu Qingge turned forward and sped. He was silent for the rest of the trip, even as Luo Binghe pleaded, and demanded, and *squeezed. Disrespectful!!!* There was no point. He would find out soon enough, and it's not like Liu Qingge understood more than just…

The scream.

His teeth stopped chattering at some point — possibly because the *beast* was annoying. They reached the weapons shop, and Liu Qingge dragged Luo Binghe down into the basement, heart ramming in his throat. To his surprise, Luo Binghe did not immediately rip free from his hold to sprint to Shen Qingqiu's side. He lingered, expression diplomatic.

Years ago, he would have flown to his shizun's side, rather possessively and irritatingly. What happened? It wasn't as if Luo Binghe had matured and aged out of such actions. Liu Qingge recognized the restraint tightening his muscles, his fingers curling ever so slightly.

"Ahh… that is better," Mu Qingfang said with a relieved sigh. He had his fingers on his shixiong's wrist.

Yue Qingyuan sat on the other side of the bed, face tight and pale with worry. He only barely opened his eyes, fingers pressed to the meridian near Shen Qingqiu's heart.

"Closer, Luo Binghe," Mu Qingfang demanded.

Jerked into motion, Luo Binghe peeled away and drifted across the room. "What happened?" His eyes snapped to a dozen different places: the blood splattered over Shen Qingqiu's robes, the bruising underneath his eyes, his trembling hands, the sweat that made his hair cling to his face. Not once had Shen Qingqiu ever appeared this disorderly.

“It appears as if there is… some type of curse,” Mu Qingfang started. “Connected to you.” His eyes shifted to Luo Binghe and he raised a single eyebrow in question.

Liu Qingge curled and uncurled his fingers.

“What happened?” Yue Qingyuan asked, voice cold and level.

“Nothing,” Shen Qingqiu croaked. His voice startled them all.

As if tugged on a thread, Liu Qingge drew close. He rounded the bed, stalking like some sort of predator, uncertain and anxious. Quiet yearnings whispered in the back of his mind, ones that he would not listen to.

They wanted him to push Yue Qingyuan aside and take Shen Qingqiu into his-

No.

He never allowed himself to even *think* about it.

Disrespectful, he chided himself.

Not for the first time, Liu Qingge hated that he went on that mission with Shen Qingqiu – the one Madam Meiyin. It was that mission that made him realize what the warmth in his chest meant. Before it had been *fine.* Before he could hold Shen Qingqiu’s elegant wrist and flush his meridians, basking in the warmth in complete ignorance.

Now he knew what that feeling was.

And it made it *worse.*

“Nothing,” Shen Qingqiu said again, clearing his throat. He tried to pull himself together, wiping wrinkles from his blankets and straightening his robes. “We were taking a walk. There was much to catch up on.”

Everyone looked at Luo Binghe to confirm. There was a strange look in the disciple's eyes. Then he seemed to make a decision. Tears spilled down his cheeks. His lips trembled as he let out a weakened whimper. “It’s this disciple’s fault.”

“Oh, Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu murmured, warmth spilling into his voice. His hand reached out to him, shaking.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe choked. He stumbled towards him and collapsed down beside the bed, torso draped over his shizun’s legs.

Liu Qingge grit his teeth and hissed a quiet, “Disrespectful!”

The truth was he was jealous. He wanted that. He wanted to shove aside the others, and sink into the arms of-

No.

“Explain!” Liu Qingge demanded instead.

Hesitation sank over Shen Qingqiu’s face. He was hiding something. “It is not Luo Binghe’s fault,” he said, resolutely. “There…” His voice died off and his eyes flickered slightly to the left. Eyebrows pinching, he frowned.

“This disciple found a-“ Luo Binghe started.

Shen Qingqiu’s hackles raised. “It’s fine! Binghe! It wasn’t your fault!” Before the disciple could explain further, Shen Qingqiu rushed to add, “It appears to be a temporary curse that binds this master to Luo Binghe. It will resolve itself shortly.” His fingers twitched, as if reaching for a fan. “This master must simply trouble Luo Binghe with… staying nearby until further notice.”

Something curious flashed over Luo Binghe’s expression. He reached out to catch one of his shizun’s hands and leaned forward. His eyes searched his shizun’s face, resolute and reverential. “This disciple will stay at Shizun’s side.”

Shocked, Shen Qingqiu stared at his disciple. His free hand jerked again. After a few moments, his face smoothed out. “This master is grateful.”

There was some tension there.

Liu Qingge’s eyes narrowed on the two of them. He was at a loss on what he was missing. Something happened between the two of them. That much was obvious. Whatever it was, whatever *happened,* Liu Qingge would figure it out.

Something, *someone*, had to answer for it.

And he would figure out who.

Chapter End Notes

I was excited for this angry little man to come into the picture!!

now we get to have some *real* fun.

also, chapters 4 and 5 are a bit on the shorter side, so, a little treat, for all of us!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

About 1700 words, and about an 8 minute reading time.

Early-ish update because again, a shorter chapter.

CW: Chronic Illness With the Reference of Death.

It was a really bad day for Shen Qingqiu. His muscles quivered from the memory of the pain, and everyone in the room kept staring at him as if he were a fragile piece of art teetering on the edge of a pedestal. He wanted to be alone. He wanted a bath. He wanted to close the door to his bamboo house and possibly scream for an hour or two.

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck-

Out of the corner of his eye, he kept eying Luo Binghe. His disciple's face kept falling, eyes turning dark, whenever he thought no one was looking. That did not bode well for Shen Qingqiu!! He wondered what Luo Binghe's angle was. Why did he stick around? Why did he pretend to be doting and afraid for him? He even was (mostly) respectful to the other peak lords in the room.

Luo Binghe allowed Mu Qingfang to experiment without complaint, holding out his wrist as Mu Qingfang compared his meridians to Shen Qingqiu's. There were a few more tentative explorations, one of which being: how far could Luo Binghe be away from Shen Qingqiu before he started to feel pain?

That experiment came to a rather quick and decisive end when everyone realized that Shen Qingqiu wasn't saying when he started to feel pain, and instead only admitted anything when he could not bear it any longer.

After getting an earful of Mu Qingfang's lecture, they all had decided that this mess can be revisited after finishing business in Jin Lan City. The others left to go deal with the sowers and begin the process of divvying out the cure. There were a few others left in the basement, yet none seemed overly eager for conversation, which Shen Qingqiu appreciated immensely.

The System had yet to spout anything but absolute garbage. Every now and then a sharp ear-piercing noise would crackle through his brain and leave him silently gasping and holding back a whimper.

[ERROR: uPda%T(01101110 G]

There was some sort of progress bar, and it jumped between 85% back down to 0.0005% in the span of seconds. Earlier that day, Shen Qingqiu had watched it sluggishly grow from 24% up to 98% and he had *hoped* that by the time the afternoon hit, that he would be able to jump up in a flourish of his robes and escape.

He had no such luck.

He leaned back against the headboard, hands folded in his lap, as he tried to recount the last twenty-four hours.

Had he imagined waking up as Shen Yuan?

Ah! He wished he had his fan. It was too embarrassing to ask Luo Binghe, especially with so many others in the room. How would he even go about it?

Do you remember meeting a slightly ugly man who was probably just a few months away from dying?

Did you accidentally kiss him on a train ride?

Do you remember a room that had a rather expansive collection of your face?

There's no way he could do that!!

"Is Shizun hungry?" Luo Binghe asked.

Someone who was thrown into a modern world ought to have more questions. Luo Binghe did not. He had a pleasant, warm expression plastered on his face whenever Shen Qingqiu's eyes fell on him.

"No," Shen Qingqiu told him. He hated being bedridden. Despite the exhaustion that sank into his body, he wanted the freedom of his own two feet. It was too soon since he had that strange maybe-dream as Shen Yuan. The hospital was too fresh in his mind.

Luo Binghe frowned. Well, really, it was a pout.

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu admonished, unable to help himself. "This master needs you most by his side." His eyes flickered to the System, reading the broken dialogue box, so he missed the way his disciple's cheeks dusted red.

"Shizun has not eaten since the previous evening," Luo Binghe pressed.

"And how will Binghe solve that?" Shen Qingqiu asked.

"This disciple will make food for his shizun," Luo Binghe said, his voice growing warbly and wet.

Shen Qingqiu wondered how much of it was an act. Common sense screamed for him not to fall for it. Despite every ounce of self-preservation he had, his heart crumbled. "Binghe," he

murmured and lifted a shaking hand to his disciple's head. His coordination was lacking, but he still managed to pat his hair.

Luo Binghe's eyes fluttered shut and he pressed into the touch. His lower lip trembled. What an incredible performance!!

Hello?? Protagonist?? Who is this for? No one else is here to pay attention!

"This master is bedbound, and needs his disciple to stay near," Shen Qingqiu said. "What would Binghe do? Carry this master to the kitchens?" He meant it as a joke.

Though Luo Binghe seemed to take it as a challenge. He sat up with determination shining in his eyes.

The door to the Jin Zi Weapons Shop burst open and footsteps pounded down the stairs, saving Shen Qingqiu from whatever Luo Binghe was about to say or do. His disciple jumped to his feet. He kept his body loose and casual, but Shen Qingqiu recognized the energy coiling in him: he was ready to fight whoever reached the landing.

It was Liu Qingge.

There was the slightest flush from exertion and anger on his skin. It made his dark eyes shine. Shen Qingqiu was caught, not for the first time, by Liu Qingge's beauty. Even with his hair and clothes slightly mussed by a quick flight, he was fiercely handsome. "Get up," he demanded. "We're leaving."

"Excuse me?" Shen Qingqiu blinked.

Liu Qingge raced across the room and started snatching things and stuffing them into his qiankun pouch.

"What happened?" Luo Binghe asked. He rolled back and forth his feet, as if itching to start a fight.

Not down here, please!

At least wait until there would be no other bystanders to get caught in the crossblows!

"They blamed him," Liu Qingge said, breathless. He threw a sharp glance at Shen Qingqiu and threw a robe at him. "What are you doing? Get dressed."

"Blamed me?" Shen Qingiu asked, startled. He started to untangle himself from the blankets. His joints screeched in protest as he wrangled on the robe. Dizziness washed around him, and his legs buckled. Hands caught him before he could collapse.

Luo Binghe was right there, with such convincing worry on his face. Really!! This acting was top notch!

"Disrespectful," Liu Qingge grumbled.

After securing the robe, Shen Qingqiu collapsed back onto the bed. His weakened state did nothing for his thin face, and again he wished for a fan.

“Well?” Luo Binghe demanded.

“*Binghe,”* Shen Qingqiu said, more weakly than he meant to. “Be respectful to your shishu.”

“The sowers called you out by name,” Liu Qingge said with a deep frown. “The Old Palace Master is demanding justice. And some woman started…” His fury made his ears pink. “She said you…”

Shen Qingqiu stared up at him blankly.

“Get up!” Liu Qingge spat. “We leave now.”

This must be the beginning of the campaign that would slander his name. Shen Qingqiu felt a distant sort of resolve settle over him. Was this what Luo Binghe waited for? It only made sense. The protagonist would only finish exacting his revenge after fully dismantling every single thing that the Original Goods had fought for. “What of the Sect Leader?”

A frustrated growl grit through Liu Qingge’s teeth. To both Luo Binghe’s and Shen Qingqiu’s amazement, he turned to Luo Binghe and asked, “You want him safe?”

“Yes!” Luo Binghe said, spine straightening in a snap.

Wait. What?

“Then grab him. We leave. *Now*.” Liu Qingge turned towards the stairs.

“*What!?”* Shen Qingqiu nearly *squawked.*

There was half a second delay before Luo Binghe gathered Shen Qingqiu in his arms.

WHAT!?!?

Excuse me?? Protagonist! I am not one of your maidens!

His heart had a strange reaction, leaping into his throat and practically *singing.* Luo Binghe was so much taller now. The broad planes of his chest cushioned Shen Qingqiu. He felt as if he weighed no more than a hissing kitten in his disciple's arms. When did he get so strong?! The heft of his biceps was no joke! Ah!

“You don’t think we can stop him?” Luo Binghe asked.

“Luo Binghe!” Shen Qingqiu cried. “Set me down this instant!” He absolutely did *not* have a thick enough face for this!! He was being cradled in another man’s arms!

The *protagonist’s* arms!

Anyone would find themselves a bit breathless and embarrassed by such attention!!!

Both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe expertly ignored his protests and continued their conversation.

“No,” Liu Qingge frowned.

Despite the vague answer, Luo Binghe was able to collect enough of the clues. “He gained too much traction with the sowers and whatever that woman said,” he said, thoughtfully aloud. That’s the protagonist for you! “And with what happened last night... The Huan Hua disciples were convinced that Shizun tried to harm me. Then you came in and dragged me away. I bet they’re spinning a tale that you wrongfully captured me. We need to get Shizun out of here, and let tempers calm down. The Old Palace Master has too much influence here.” He frowned and sighed heavily. “Shizun, this lowly disciple has caused you too much trouble…”

“Binghe, that’s nonsense,” Shen Qingqiu said with a frown. “None of this is any fault of yours.” Wait. Or was it? The protagonist was a master manipulator. A few well-placed rumors and truths is what brought down the Original Goods. Except that Shen Qingqiu was confused. If this was all a part of Luo Binghe’s plans, then why whisk him away from it all? Why not allow him to fall? Why *carry* him? Right. He was being carried. Heat scorched his cheeks, and Shen Qingqiu snapped, “*This* is nonsense. Let me go. I can stand!” He continued to protest, even as both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge reached the outdoors and threw down their swords.

Neither listened.

There was *one* good thing to come out of this mortifying situation: the System seemed to have slightly less errors in its dialogue box. That meant that the closer he was to the protagonist, the more likely the System would be able to repair itself.

But... how much closer would Luo Binghe have to get to fix it!?

Shen Qingqiu was already in his arms!!

Despite his continued protests, both Liu Qingge and Luo Bingghe took off. Together, the three of them left Jin Lan City behind.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

3200 words for this chapter, which is about a 15 minute reading time.

Teehee ✨

CW: Allusions to past-abuse and traumatic responses to that.

Somehow, Liu Qingge ended up here: sitting in the bamboo house kitchen with Shen Qingqiu leaning against him. He tried not to get distracted by the heat of his body or the fluttering in his own heart. No matter how long he thought about it, he had no idea why he was there. Well, he knew he was stand-in support for Shen Qingqiu who lacked the strength to even sit on his own (even though he had pestered them the entire flight that he could stand).

There probably were other options than using Liu Qingge to make sure that the thin-faced peak lord did not fall over.

No one suggested one.

Not too long ago, the three of them had arrived back at Qing Jing Peak. Without any further discussion, they went into the bamboo house.

(Had Shen Qingqiu stopped complaining at this point? No. He had not. His voiced complaints grew louder upon arriving at the peak. He was probably too thin-faced to let his disciples catch sight of him like this…)

Luo Binghe had brought his shizun to the kitchen and set him down, and as soon as he started to teeter, Liu Qingge was there. The most that came out of it was a slight fire in Luo Binghe's eyes — a warning. Nothing else. Not even a disgruntled huff from Shen Qingqiu.

Not a lot of people touched Liu Qingge. Sometimes there were battles, and other times there were reasons to visit Qian Cao Peak. There were few people in his life that had ever dared to reach out and touch him: his sister for one and on a rare occasion, Shen Qingqiu. To say he was mildly aware of his shixiong would be a bit of an understatement. He felt every small shift of movement in the man beside him. There were many layers of silk between them, and still Shen Qingqiu's heat sank into his body and settled deep into the recesses of his heart.

Liu Qingge did not know why he followed them into the house. He should have delivered them and left.

Now that he thought about it, he hadn't even *needed* to fly all the way back to the fucking sect! He could have just convinced the two to leave, and headed back.

There was probably something to attend to on his own peak. Hell, he should coordinate with the Sect Leader and the other peak lords about whatever bullshit was happening in Jin Lan City. The others didn't even know what Liu Qingge had planned. The most anyone knew was that Liu Qingge had looked Yue Qingyuan in the eye and they shared a *look.* In the background, the Old Palace Master passionately cried out his declamation. The old man had demanded Shen Qingqiu be brought to them to face "justice" and he self-righteously begged for the freedom of his "prized disciple."

Somewhere in the middle of that speech, Liu Qingge had left.

Now he was here, listening to the quiet sounds of dishes clinking and the gentle click of flames. Luo Binghe's chopping was precise and consistent, and lulled Liu Qingge to a place of comfort. The stress of the entire evening crashed on him all at once, and he became achingly aware of how little rest he had actually given himself these past few days. His eyelids grew heavy.

Fuck.

He would not fall asleep here.

Liu Qingge glanced at Shen Qingqiu. The man was in a meditative state, eyebrows slightly furrowed. He would need a bath, his hair brushed, and a new change of robes. Not that he could do any of those on his own. Heat rushed to Liu Qingge's cheeks as his brain helpfully began to supply him with images on how he might help. He hissed under his breath, *"Disrespectful."*

Awareness filled Shen Qingqiu's eyes and he glanced over at Liu Qingge. "What was that, Liu-shidi?"

Embarrassed with himself, Liu Qingge cleared his throat. "Make it bland," he said, louder.

Luo Binghe paused at the order and he threw a frustrated look over his shoulder. It was one thing to allow Liu Qingge into his kitchens, and an entirely *other* thing to let the peak lord order him around. *Disrespectful brat!* Liu Qingge was his shishu! At the very least, as the brat's senior, he was owed *some* respect!

Instead of sneering or glowering, Luo Binghe flicked one glance to his shizun. Just like that, his scowl relaxed. He understood. It was… odd being understood so well. Liu Qingge did not have to painfully outline all of his thoughts. It always confounded him when people didn't make the same leaps in logic that he did.

The same thing had happened when Liu Qingge first went to the two of them, and said that they needed to get Shen Qingqiu out of there. There weren't a thousand annoying questions

trying to connect the dots – Luo Binghe had done that on his own.

Right now, both of them were on the same page: Shen Qingqiu was in pain and weak. He did not have the constitution or appetite for a grand meal.

Frustration tightened Luo Binghe's jaw for a single second. Then he looked Liu Qingge in the eye, and gave a bare nod. "This disciple will not insult his shizun with *bland* food," he grumbled.

Even with the grumbling, Liu Qingge read between the lines: the food would be mild enough not to upset his shixiong's tender stomach.

As if summoned by his disciple's discontent, Shen Qingqiu blinked awake and soothed, "Any food Binghe makes will be exceptional."

Liu Qingge could not withhold a snort.

With a thoughtful hum, Shen Qingqiu continued, "Liu-shidi has not had a meal prepared by Binghe." He raised a shaking hand to tap his lower lip in a pondering manner. "Binghe, are you making enough for your shishu?"

"…" Luo Binghe had a stormy expression.

"I do not need any food," Liu Qingge said, stiffly. He should leave after ensuring Shen Qingqiu was taken care of. He should…

He did not want to.

There was nothing he could do if Shen Qingqiu started falling to the whims of the curse. He had no useful medical knowledge. No knowledge of curses. If it were something he could face with a sword, that would be an entirely different matter. But in this, he was utterly useless. He hated it.

"Nonsense." Shen Qingqiu waved his hand in place of a fan. "You should have some of Binghe's food. It's truly exceptional."

Luo Binghe looked as if he struggled between a pout and preening underneath the praise.

"Unnecessary," Liu Qingge argued.

A hand took his, and Shen Qingqiu looked him in the eye. All at once, he seemed to realize what he did. His ears colored with a blush, and he quickly let go.

Liu Qingge couldn't hear past the beating of his heart.

"Does Liu-shidi have matters to attend to?" Shen Qingqiu asked, voice strained. There was a quiet hue of desperation in his eye, as if he did not want to be alone. That… didn't make sense.

Mouth dry, Liu Qingge did not answer. He could not answer. Nothing was as important as making sure Shen Qingqiu was okay, even if there was nothing he could do. He should leave. He should *go.* He should-

“Liu-shishu should stay so we know more about what happened with the Old Palace Master and the sowers,” Luo Binghe said. He sounded like he was sulking.

Startled, Liu Qingge sat in befuddled silence. He should *stay?*

“So, that settles that.” Shen Qingqiu had a pleased smile.

It did?

He supposed explaining more would not hurt; though, the thought of straightening out his thoughts and attempting to give a verbal report on that bullshit sounded just as fun as pulling off his nails. He stewed in silence, and he tried not to think of the way Shen Qingqiu’s head rested against his shoulder.

If he gave away that he noticed, it would ruin the moment and his shixiong would move.

Liu Qingge did not want him to move.

His heart was in his throat, and the palms of his hands started to sweat. Then a thought occurred to him. Sitting up straight, Liu Qingge said, “How about the curse?” Beside him, Shen Qingqiu tensed.

Luo Binghe froze.

Silence stretched.

The two of them absolutely were hiding something. Liu Qingge was not conversationally adept enough to figure out *what.* His fingers curled. Just as he was about to demand them to explain what the hell happened, Shen Qingqiu spoke, “We will discuss such matters after the meal. For now let’s hear what happened with the sowers and the Old Palace Master.”

There was no room for argument.

Besides, Shen Qingqiu let his head fall back again. The weight of it felt so grounding against his shoulder.

Throat tight, Liu Qingge recounted the day’s earlier events.

Then came the stupid and annoying questions.

Well.

Shit.

The food *was* good. Liu Qingge had never really paid too much attention to food before. It either kept him energized or it didn't. He never was one to crave or allow himself to crave. This might ruin that. Inwardly, he scorned himself. He could not allow this meal to ruin his self control. He could not begin to *want* it.

Wanting something he couldn't have, something he never knew he wanted to have, was too much.

There was already *one thing,* one person he *couldn't have.*

He had never known he wanted it, until it was too late.

Until it consumed him.

His *want* for Shen-

It took him too long to realize two pairs of eyes were staring at him. Liu Qingge startled, and glanced between a gently pleased smile and a smug one. The three of them sat around a table, with Shen Qingqiu now sitting at Luo Binghe's side, pressed ever so slightly against him. Two different feelings varied within Liu Qingge at the sight: relief that he no longer had to stifle a blush whenever he felt movement and the sharp bite of jealousy.

"Well?" Luo Binghe asked, knowing full well the answer to his own question. "Does this meal please Shishu?"

Liu Qingge's eyes narrowed.

"You seem to enjoy it," Shen Qingqiu said, voice smooth and elegant. "You smiled."

"What." Liu Qingge straightened, and felt color rise to his cheeks. There is no way he *smiled* at Luo Binghe's cooking. Absolutely *not!* He refused to believe it.

Luo Binghe's face grew even more self-congratulatory. "Here you go, Liu-shishu, you seem to really enjoy this." Their meal was congee with very light toppings. Luo Binghe had cooked more additives for himself and Liu Qingge, without a doubt just to show off. He plucked a few things to add to Liu Qingge's dish, and fuck.

It was *exactly* what made Liu Qingge's body melt as soon as it hit his tongue. He scowled. It was… discomforting that Luo Binghe had read him so well.

The annoying brat fluttered his lashes at Liu Qingge and stole a bitter vegetable from his bowl. "Liu-shishu seems to dislike this one." He popped it into his mouth, sensually slow.

Blush deepening, Liu Qingge glowered.

What.

What.

"*Luo Binghe!"* Shen Qingqiu admonished, scandalized.

An innocent expression flooded Luo Binghe's face and he turned his fluttering lashes at his shizun. Shameless!!! "What, Shizun?" Luo Binghe asked, the perfect picture of innocence. "This disciple didn't want Liu-shishu's dish to be ruined by something he did not like."

Shen Qingqiu lifted his chopsticks as if he might smack his disciple with them, and decided at the last moment not to. He was missing his fan.

Neither Liu Qingge nor Luo Binghe had fetched one for him — probably for the same reason. With the persistent fluttering weakness of Shen Qingqiu's body, he kept dropping things. Even his handling of the chopsticks was a bit rough. The rest of the meal continued on without too much fuss. Despite Shen Qingqiu's praise of the food, he only picked at his own bowl. Clearly, the pain had stolen too much of his appetite.

Every now and then, a dark look settled over Luo Binghe's face. Liu Qinge recognized it as guilt.

When everything was finished, Luo Binghe started to gather the dishes. Liu Qingge considered him for a moment, and then said, "Stop."

The disciple stilled and cut a glance at him.

"Let me." Liu Qingge took the dishes from him.

Shock relaxed Luo Binghe's expression.

As an answer to the unasked question, Liu Qingge threw a pointed look at Shen Qingqiu. If Luo Binghe left to take care of the dishes, he would have to drag the weakened peak lord behind him. It was easier if Liu Qingge did it. He gathered the rest of the dishes without a word, and went into the kitchen to deal with them. He traveled on his own often enough to know how to clean up after meals. It wasn't a big deal. He didn't understand why both of them were looking at him that way. (No, he *wasn't* retreating into the kitchen to hide from them!)

As he scrubbed the dishes clean, his thoughts ran. Always, *always,* they ran. Fighting was easy, and it cleared his head. Meditating was nice, too. He could stamp away all of his thoughts, and sink into a state where there was nothing but blissful silence.

It was all the in-between of all of that.

Thoughts, so many thoughts. All of them returned to that *scream.* His shixiong's scream.

There was nothing Liu Qingge could do. Nothing he could even do right *now.* He was useless.

Useless-

One of the bowls broke.

Teeth clenched, he dropped both of the halves and gripped tightly onto the side of the basin.

He hated this.

He *hated* that something managed to harm Shen Qingqiu, and Liu Qingge had *let it*.

Now his shixiong was tied to his un-dead disciple, weakened and falling apart.

(Wasn't Without a Cure enough?)

His eyes shut. The night replayed itself all over again – finding his shixiong covered in blood in the hands of another sect. Taking him back to Mu Qingfang, *begging* him to figure out what was wrong. An entire night of waiting, and waiting, and *waiting.* Then the scream. That fucking scream.

Shit.

He was shaking again.

"Liu Qingge?"

Startled, Liu Qingge jerked away from the basin. He glanced up and spotted Luo Binghe in the doorway. The brief experimentation earlier with Mu Qingfang told them that there was a decent range that Luo Binghe could walk from his shizun. Not far enough to really leave the building – but enough that Luo Binghe *might* be able to stand in another room for a short time. Most of the experiment was inconclusive because, like a fucking idiot, Shen Qingqiu hadn't vocalized when he was in pain.

Luo Binghe's eyes dropped, and he stared at Liu Qingge's hands.

It was then that he realized he was bleeding. The broken dish had cut into his palm. Huh. He turned and plucked the two halves of the broken bowl out of the water. There was no need to explain himself. He would simply wait for Luo Binghe to voice what he wanted.

He did not.

The disciple simply stood there and watched as Liu Qingge finished cleaning up.

His expression was dark.

Guilt, again.

Something strange was happening to Luo Binghe. There was a pull of energy that started to sputter and waft around him. The energy was dark. It almost seemed like…

"What happened?" Liu Qingge demanded. Whatever happened last night, it made the disciple feel like he was at fault. And it was causing his qi to become unbalanced. *Fuck.* Liu Qingge was not the person to help him. Where the fuck was Shen Qingqiu?

Again, Luo Binghe did not need any clarification. He knew where the question had come from. The silence simmered. Then he raised his eyes. They almost glimmered red. “It was my fault.”

Liu Qingge turned to him, hands clenched at his sides. He waited.

The look on the disciple’s face darkened. “Did you not hear me? It’s my fault. I did it.”

“What are you saying?” Liu Qingge demanded. His shixiong adored this brat of a disciple. Even if he would never say it aloud, the past few years were more than enough proof. It pissed Liu Qingge off that it was yet *another* thing he could not fix. He wanted to be angry, to rage that Luo Binghe had stayed away and joined another sect when his shizun was grieving his loss.

But he did not know all the facts.

Something happened. Unfortunately, he knew his shixiong. He knew that if Luo Binghe had done something wrong, that his shixiong would protect him. Even if it meant hurting himself.

And on the flip side of that stupid *fucking* coin, he knew that Luo Binghe always took every single minor mistake and thought it a catastrophe. There was one time he was in the room when the disciple had accidentally spilled some ink on some calligraphy.

He had seen the way Luo Binghe’s body tightened, the fear that coiled around his muscles. It was the fear that *this* would be it – the moment that finally let Shen Qingqiu see what an utter mistake it was to trust and take Luo Binghe into his care.

At the time, Liu Qingge did nothing. There was nothing he could do.

Besides, it wasn’t *Liu Qingge’s* comfort that the disciple had needed. What he needed was Shen Qingqiu’s soothing voice and open arms and assurances. Luo Binghe *always* punished himself severely, as if it were something he deserved.

The question was: *did* he deserve it now?

Luo Binghe stared at him, all play-acting friendliness gone. That awful energy was whipping around him. “Are you really this stupid?”

What?

It was a different person standing in front of him. *Not* the doting disciple that adored his shizun.

“Do you need me to spell it out for you? I did it.” Luo Binghe’s lips quirked, harsh and cruel. “I am the reason he is cursed. He was *running* from me, and crying out for *you.* But you weren’t there. You were too slow, trying to catch that last sower. Weren’t you?” He raised an eyebrow.

Breath quickening, Liu Qingge curled his hands into fists. “You-!”

This did not make sense.

Don't listen, he's doing this on purpose, he's riling you up-

"And while you were floundering around, Shizun was *calling* for you. Where were you, when I tracked him down? Where were you, when I slammed him into the wall? Where were you, when he *bled*-"

One second, Luo Binghe was in the doorway. The next he was flying across the room and slamming into the table. It cracked. Liu Qingge drew Chen Luan. The sword sang as it flew through the air, igniting the adrenaline in his veins.

Finally, *finally,* Liu Qingge had something he could actually fucking do.

Rage silenced every last thought in his mind. He had one clear goal:

Fight.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

3,700 words for this chapter, which is roughly a 19 minute reading time.

This is a hurt + comfort fic. Before we have too much comfort, we have to have a little hurt...

CW: This chapter gets a little heavy with self-hatred and blame. Self-harm, in some aspects. Please be wary. Expect typical canon violence.

For those of you who don't want to go through the self-hate, there will be summary at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe was many things. An orphan. A disciple. A Heavenly Demon. He was wanting, greedy, and stubborn. Someone had once called him kind. He was hard working, determined, and never knew when to give up. Someone else had once called him *optimistic.*

But the one thing that Luo Binghe was *not,* the one thing he could *never* be, was enough.

The second Luo Binghe's eyes cracked open that morning, he knew something was off. Healers surrounded him with their fingers on his meridians. Tiny pulses of spiritual qi flooded into him and grated his insides. To his horror, he heard the quiet confused mumble of, "*Demonic…"*

Then there was Liu Qingge.

Brilliant, beautiful, and the picture of wrath, demanding for him.

Luo Binghe was still trying to piece his mind together. One instance he was in a completely new world, and now he was *here* again. His cultivation should feel like a relief. Something was wrong.

Something was wrong.

His shishu had been shaking. Shaking. The War God of Bai Zhan Peak, the fierce unbeatable warrior, the man who taught demons *fear,* was shaking.

Teasing his shishu was always fun. More fun now that Luo Binghe had fewer reservations than he did when he was younger. (So what if it had the added benefit of distracting his shishu?) The two of them had always played this delicate line between open jealous-hostility and impeccable politeness. That hadn't changed.

It was comforting.

Even if the two had never been on good terms, at least his shishu had never been afraid of him. Besides, Liu Qingge *saw* Luo Binghe.

Not all of you, a dark voice reminded Luo Binghe. ***Never all of you. That is why he hasn't cast you out.***

Something… was wrong.

The morning passed in a strange haze, with Luo Binghe fighting to keep his thoughts in order. He felt as if his body were nothing but a puppet, and he was desperately fighting to find the right strings to execute a convincing act. He was losing control.

As soon as his shizun's arms were around him, clarity hit him like a pail of water clearing away a stain.

It was familiar. He smelled of blood and strange medicinal herbs, but underneath was bamboo and Shizun and it was *home.*

Home. He was home.

It's not your home anymore.

"It is not Luo Binghe's fault."

But it is, isn't it?

The only reason Shizun was allowing Luo Binghe this close was because it would kill him otherwise. Luo Binghe had done that. He *hurt* his shizun. Right now, his bloodmites worked in a frenzy, attempting to repair what the "curse" had done. There was too much. His meridians were in complete disarray.

That was Luo Binghe's fault.

All the blood, the pain that his shizun went through, was *his fault.*

Why did he run? Why is he covering for me right now? Why…? Why?

Maybe it was for self-preservation. Shen Qingqiu played nice now, doted on him and patted his head, and let him *pretend.* The moment all of this was fixed, his shizun would run again. He would leave.

Because Luo Binghe wasn't enough.

No matter how hard he tried, no matter how much he fought, no matter how much he trained, in the end it wasn't enough.

He had earned the good grace of his shizun, and somewhere along the way he had *ruined* that.

Demon. Beast. Liar. Insatiable. A disappointment.

Except…

The other world. Shen Yuan.

Where did *that* all fit into *all of this?*

Was that… not real?

The moment of clarity that Luo Binghe had in his shizun's arms disappeared into a confusing haze.

All Luo Binghe wanted was to go home. He wanted to be by his shizun's side. He wanted to be *good enough.* He wanted to prove to himself and to Shen Qingqiu that he was worthy of standing by him.

He wasn't.

When it came down to it, he was selfish, greedy, and *he wasn't enough.*

(Something was wrong.)

Blood roaring, Luo Binghe flipped back and narrowly avoided Cheng Luan. The sword was a blur, cutting through the air with a hiss. It was beautiful. The pure fury on Liu Qingge's face was a sight to behold. He could admire his shishu in this: the way he became a figure of perfect violence. He was fast. From the kitchen to the doorway, he moved with rapid precision. In half a heart beat, he was there leaping across the broken table to slam a foot into Luo Binghe's chest.

His ribs creaked. Air swept from his lungs. Luo Binghe flew backwards to slam against the wall. Eyes fluttering shut, he drew in a shallow breath and eased through the electric discomfort in his chest.

It brought some pieces of clarity.

There was a knot of gore where his heart should be. It was a violent tangle of betrayal, self-loathing, and confusion. His meridians burned. Scorching heat flashed through his body like a fever. He felt the imbalance. It felt as if one part of himself was trying to consume the other.

Something was wrong.

Xin Mo.

The sword pounded in his head. It raved in excitement and screeched to be drawn. ***Blood. Bones. Break. Bleed. Cut. Slice. Win. Rage. Death. Pain. More. Now. NOW.*** It was usually easier to ignore its rantings.

Not now. Every single want burned like a *need* in Luo Binghe. He felt the desire to draw the sword and let it sink its teeth into Liu Qingge. His arms *ached* to feel the clash of their swords. It would be a beautiful fight. One that would run his body ragged.

Break.

Bleed.

HURT.

Luo Binghe shot to his feet and launched across the room in an animalistic fury. His shoulder slammed into Liu Qingge's chest, and both of them collapsed to the ground. He caught one of Liu Qingge's arms in a tight grip. The other freed arm threw a qi-enfused punch just below his ribs. It hurt. Good.

Kiss. Bite.

Their legs tangled. A knee slammed into his gut. He threw his weight down and pinned Liu Qingge to the floor, breathing ragged.

Fuck.

Sex.

Rut.

Heat roared through Luo Binghe's blood. He was confused, momentarily, by the change in Xin Mo's chanting. Confused even more by the way his body reacted with Liu Qingge squirming underneath him.

He looked beautifully bullied and annoyed and-

A powerful kick launched Luo Binghe off. He skidded across the ground, heaving. What the *fuck* was he doing? Luo Binghe rolled on to his feet, and side-stepped a sword glare. Adrenaline empowered him. It sang an enchanting tune.

Rage.

Pain.

Death. Death. DEATH.

That wasn't the point in all of this, was it?

No. The point was *punishment.*

Luo Binghe deserved this. Maybe, he could show his shizun how sorry he was. He would take penance for his crime. And his shizun would *see* that he didn't mean to hurt him.

I won't do it again, I am sorry. Please. Please. Let me come home.

He let Cheng Luan catch his side. A sharp, acidic cut stretched over his ribs.

Good.

He deserved this.

He hurt Shizun.

It was his weakness and his lack of control that caused all of this to begin with. He had *let* his jealousy and pain guide his actions.

Another series of sword glares flew at Luo Binghe. He put up a bit of a resistence, just enough to dodge a few more lethal blows and to give Liu Qingge the impression that this was a fight.

Not a self-imposed punishment.

Pain blossomed across his thigh as a particularly vicious cut sliced through his muscle. His leg faltered, and he stumbled back to narrowly avoid the sharp hiss of a blade.

Luo Binghe grew up being beaten – because he wasn't good enough. Those beatings had *stopped,* but obviously that wasn't because he had grown out of *needing* them. He deserved this.

I'll learn, Shizun, I'll get better. I promise. I swear.

He did not know why, even back in Jin Lan City, his shizun covered for him. *It's not your fault,* Shen Qingqiu had said with such conviction that Luo Binghe nearly believed him.

Why?

Why?

Why push him into the Abyss?

Why protect him *now,* yet still cling on to Liu Qingge for safety? As if Luo Binghe might-

As if he might hurt him.

Isn't that what you did?

Luo Binghe felt the pricking of tears in his eyes. A fist empowered with qi slammed into his chest. Bones cracked. His vision swam as his back slammed back against the wall. That was the war god for you – lethal beauty and precision. He slumped to the ground, tensing to dodge a blow from Cheng Luan.

It did not come.

Jaw clenched, Luo Binghe blinked back into awareness.

Liu Qingge stood before him, the picture of wrath. He held himself at bay, dark eyes sliding over Luo Binghe. "Fight me," he grit out.

Shit.

"I am." Luo Binghe started to rise to his feet, casting a slight glance towards Shen Qingqiue's bedroom. He had deposited his shizun there with a change of robes. It was cruel of him; he knew it would take far too long for Shizun to freshen up and change. Just enough time to incite the war god.

Lips curling in distaste, Liu Qingge drew back. "Then draw your sword."

"I don't need a sword to beat you," Luo Binghe said, and pulled on an egotistic grin. If he wasn't hiding his heritage, he would have allowed his eyes to flash red.

To his horror, Liu Qingge eased his stance and took half a step back.

"What are you doing?" Luo Binghe growled, his grin dimming. "It was me. It was *me.* I did it!"

"No," Liu Qingge said, frustration igniting his eyes.

Cheng Luan slipped back into its sheath.

No. *No.* Luo Binghe was hardly bruised from that fight. He threw himself forward, raising a fist to the war god.

This time Liu Qingge only blocked and side-stepped. He did not raise a hand against Luo Binghe.

"It was my fault" Luo Binghe roared, frustrated.

Xin Mo whispered to him and told him to draw his blade. Once he drew his blade, he could fight in earnest. He and Xin Mo could match themselves against Liu Qingge's fighting expertise and truly test their own strength. What an *incredible* battle it would be!

Pain.

Break.

Cut.

He stole your precious shizun from you. He's all that your shizun wants. Take him out of the picture. Show your shizun who is strongest. Show him that he can't run from you. That he is yours, and only yours-

"No!" Luo Binghe shouted.

There was sound and movement beyond the door. Shen Qingqiu had finished.

Luo Binghe did not have much time before his shizun put a stop to this. He needed to anger Liu Qingge again. Hundreds of different options slid through the grease of his mind, things he could say or do. In a flash, he slipped in Liu Qingge's defenses and slammed a fist into his cheek. That had to be enough, right? It had to be-

Shock widened Liu Qingge's eyes and he stumbled backwards. Outrage ignited his eyes, and his mouth pulled into a vicious snarl. This was the face that would make disciples wet themselves. *This* was the face that meant the end.

Good.

Good.

Luo Binghe waited for a series of blows that never came.

"*Brat,"* Liu Qingge hissed. He spit, and a wad of blood and saliva hit the floor. "If it is your fault, then *fix it."*

At a loss, Luo Binghe stared.

What?

Why wasn't he losing control?

Why?

Was it because he still thought Luo Binghe a human?

Luo Binghe could fix that.

The door finally swept open, and Shen Qingqiu stood against it, body trembling from exertion. "*Binghe!"* he cried out.

Xin Mo howled and laughed with glee, ***Do it, do it, do it, do it-***

The plan coalesced. He did not think about what would happen after, he thought about *now.* A false calm settled over him, and he narrowed his eyes at his shishu. The smile on his lips was cruel and arrogant. "How did Shizun explain this lowly one's absence?"

Distrust narrowed Liu Qingge's gaze. "You died."

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said, voice breaking.

There was a shine in his shizun’s eyes. Was that… regret?

Luo Binghe couldn’t dare to hope for that. It couldn’t *be* that. His shizun was scared of him – of the monstrous and dirty thing that he *was.* Because Luo Binghe hurt him. But now, *now,* this beast will show him that it was alright to punish him. He would accept it. He would atone. He would do *anything* to earn the right to be by his shizun’s side.

“This lowly one wonders if Shizun hoped for such an outcome?” Luo Binghe asked, his voice cracking. Tears burned in his eyes. “Seeing as he-”

“No,” Liu Qingge cut him off. “He mourned.”

What…?

“Liu Qingge!” Shen Qingqiu cried out, alarmed.

All the gusto swept out of Luo Binghe at once.

Lucidity sprinkled over him.

Something is wrong.

He was losing control. It was Xin Mo. Last night, he had poured every last bit of his qi into Shen Qingqiu to prevent his death. Whatever happened through the night, from then to now, it gave Xin Mo a stronghold over him. Both of his spiritual and demonic qi were horrifically imbalanced. Was this why it hurt? *Everything* was on fire. Was he at the start of a qi deviation?

Was he already having one?

Xin Mo had swept underneath his nose, sinking its tendrils into him. It fed his betrayal and his confusion. It weakened him.

“What is this?” Shen Qingqiu demanded. He tried to pull himself up into a picture of authority, though as soon as he took a step his knees shook. Neither Liu Qingge or Luo Binghe could get to him fast enough before he collapsed on to his knees. Even in a heap on the floor, he drew in a harsh, disciplinary expression and demanded, “What is going on?”

“Luo Binghe’s using me to punish himself,” Liu Qingge explained, dryly.

“Binghe?” Shen Qingqiu choked in shock.

Why did he look horrified? Why did he seem to *care?*

It didn’t make sense. It didn’t-

Xin Mo’s power swelled and knocked the air from Luo Binghe. He cried out, hands gripping his hair.

It tore through him.

Blood. Anger. Death. Pain.

Break bones.

Fight.

Rage. Death. Pain. More. More. More.

Now.

NOW.

Hands caught his shoulders. Someone was trying to talk to him. It was a calm, steady voice. A thread of spiritual qi began to seep into his battered and inflamed meridians. It wouldn't be enough.

Luo Binghe needed to escape it *now.* If he lost control, he would hurt his shizun, *again.* He-

There was a thread of power, stuttering and swelling. It was alien and strange. His focus narrowed in on it, the only hint of light in this desolate darkness, and tugged. Cold energy swelled towards him.

In the background, he heard someone scream.

All at once, Xin Mo silenced.

Luo Binghe woke to silence. It was freedom. Every single muscle in his body relaxed. The knots on the back of his neck loosened. He could finally breathe. A gentle rhythm of breath tickled the inside of his arm. His eyes cracked open. Shen Yuan lay beside him, head cushioned by his forearm. He remembered, vaguely, the last moments of their time in this world. Blood had started to seep out of Shen Yuan, and he collapsed. Luo Binghe managed to catch him before succumbing to the darkness.

Blood dried underneath Shen Yuan's nose and around his mouth. He was the utter visage of horror.

He was too fragile like this.

With his free hand, Luo Binghe brushed some hair off his shizun's forehead. He hated what he had done to his shizun, despised that despite it all he had proven that he could not be trusted. Still, he could not stop himself from giving in and touching his shizun in such a way.

He was a weak and greedy man.

He wanted more.

The novelty of peace and quiet draped over him. His heart felt like a tender thing. Here, his mind was clear and his body did not burn. It was just his shizun and himself in their own world.

Was there really any reason to go back?

Shen Yuan stirred. He had dark, long lashes that fanned his eyes. His beauty in this form was an unconventional one. Where Shen Qingqiu was harsh edges and power, Shen Yuan was delicate and soft. Like the fragile gleam of a soap bubble. His eyes opened, and he blinked a few times. His eyes focused on Luo Binghe.

As Luo Binghe guessed it would, color flooded Shen Yuan's cheeks. He tore himself out of his arms and scrambled back until he hit the door.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe murmured, and he drew himself up onto his seat.

Shen Yuan watched him with a mix of worry and alarm. "Binghe, are you alright? Xin Mo-"

How did his shizun know about *Xin Mo?* Luo Binghe purposely disguised the blade, and did not draw it. When he had to draw it for the flight, it was unrecognizable. The question was proof in itself: *this* shizun knew of the current events in the other world. He *also* knew so much more than he should.

He knew more than he was explaining.

With a grieved sigh, Luo Binghe dropped into a kowtow.

"Binghe!!" Shen Yuan startled. Hands immediately caught on to his arms and tried to encourage him to rise up. "What are you doing!?"

"This lowly one does not understand," Luo Binghe whispered, tears glistening in his eyes. He was *exhausted.* "He does not know what he did wrong, so he asks for forgiveness." As soon as Shen Yuan's hands left him, and dropped back down, forehead pressed into the floor.

"There's no need for that," Shen Yuan reprimanded, gently. "Get up this instant."

"Shizun says that," Luo Binghe said, with no will to stop his sorrow from drenching his throat and thickening his voice. "But Shizun keeps things from this Binghe. This Binghe is stupid-"

"Don't you *dare,"* Shen Yuan said with a sharp hiss. With a surprising amount of force, he wrenched Luo Binghe up and kept a tight hold on his shoulders. "You are *not* stupid."

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe wailed. "Is this lowly one not worthy of your attention or teachings? Is that not why you pushed him into the Abyss? Is it not why you continue to run and hide yourself from him?" He tried to fall back down into a kowtow, yet he was stopped by hands desperately catching his face.

“Binghe, please,” Shen Yuan said. “No more of this.”

“This lowly one is stupid and must *beg* for explanation.” Luo Binghe choked out, weak to his shizun’s gentle hold. He pressed into the chill of Shen Yuan’s hands, tears racing down his cheeks. “Please, Shizun. *Please.* This Binghe is confused. This lowly beast must demand explanation, or he is afraid he will never know what he has done wrong and will never be able to gain his master’s forgiveness.”

“You do not *need* my forgiveness, Binghe!” Shen Yuan shouted. “It is this master that must ask forgiveness from *you.”*

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe gave in, and he threw himself forward to latch on to his shizun’s waist. It was too thin. He felt ribs through the indecent clothing. He immediately wanted to throw himself into the kitchen and begin to cook a buffet of food for his shizun until he stopped looking like a brittle stick.

“Oh, my sweet little sheep…” Shen Yuan muttered, almost to himself. His hand swept over Luo Binghe’s hair and soothed him.

A mix of frustration and desperation gave way to the soothing comfort Shen Yuan offered. He smelled different here. There was no lingering bamboo smell. Instead, it was that artificial cleanliness. Though underneath that was *him.* Luo Binghe wanted to be the beast that he was and crawl underneath Shen Yuan’s shirt and breathe in his skin. He wanted to feel the warmth of his body against him.

It was a daring, dangerous thought.

He was such a greedy man.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe murmured. He was *slightly* frustrated that despite his begging, there still wasn’t a single word of explanation. To stave off the need to *bite* his shizun, he murmured into Shen Yuan’s hip bone, letting his breath sink through the thin fabric, “please.”

Greedy…

Shen Yuan shifted and cleared his throat. “Right.” He patted his shoulder, and then lifted his arms for Luo Binghe to get up.

Pfft. As if Luo Binghe was going to give up this prime spot. He had dreamed of being back in his shizun’s arms for years. Now that he was here, nothing was going to make him move.

He was not going *anywhere.* Not until he got answers from his shizun, even if that meant groveling for the next several hours and staining him with snot and tears. It was a fight that he *would* win.

There was a crash in the other room.

“What was that?” Shen Yuan tensed.

Luo Binghe was going to murder whatever it was. He was going to shove it off the balcony and not even watch it fall.

With great reluctance, Luo Binghe dragged himself out of Shen Yuan's arms and gathered his feet underneath him. He did not wait for Shen Yuan to take his hand before gently plucking him off the ground and guiding him behind him.

There was only a slight muffled protest from his shizun.

Luo Binghe might not have cultivation in this world, but he was *definitely* still able to put up a fight. He pulled the door open and stepped outside the room to a rather strange sight.

In the middle of a sitting area, red-faced and scandalized, stood a man. He held the ends of his top, attempting to stretch it down. If Shen Yuan's clothing was inappropriate, this man was downright near-naked. His top did *nothing* to cover the carved planes of his stomach, even as he attempted to stretch it down.

It was Liu Qingge in what could only be described as a cropped top.

Chapter End Notes

Summary:

Luo Binghe woke up feeling wrong. It appears that Xin Mo is feeding into his self-doubt and exacerbating his negative feelings. He finds comfort in the fact that even if he hadn't seen Liu Qingge in years, that there is no change to their relationship and his shishu still treats him the same way. When he's back with Shen Qingqiu, he feels a sense of clarity and feels at home in his arms. Though he begins to doubt and think negatively, and the momentary feeling of piece is disrupted.

The scene skips to where the last chapter left off, with Luo Binghe provoking Liu Qingge to fight him. A fight ensues. Luo Binghe allows his shishu to land a few hits. Within a few moments, Liu Qingge catches on to what is happening and stops fighting. He calls Luo Binghe out for his bullshit -- though it's a little too late.

Shen Qingqiu, who had been left to his own devices to clean up and change, finally manages to make it back into the scene to put a stop to it all.

It's still too late.

Luo Binghe has the beginnings of a bad qi deviation, and in order to escape he pulls a strange type of energy that seems attached to him.

In the modern world, Luo Binghe wakes up with Shen Yuan in his arms. After separating, Luo Binghe begins to beg Shen Yuan to explain, and of course he begins to cry. Shen Yuan insists that he is the one who should ask for forgiveness. Before Luo Binghe can get any answers, there's a strange noise.

Out in the living room, they find Liu Qingge standing in a rather shameless outfit!

Thanks for reading <3

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

3,300 words this time ~ 15 minute reading time.

Tweaked some things, because no one stopped me. It was your fault... you shouldn't have given me this much power...

Also, I want to give a HUGE shout-out to bitchless_in_baihe. She's listened to me prattle on about this fic for *hours* and has helped me curtail it into something that isn't all just super silly fun times. (Though a lot IS super silly...)

Go look for her page and read her fics!! She's amazing!

Another mention to hackAuthor_Airplane. They're also amazing and have given me great tips!

CW: Blood? And possibly second-hand embarrassment...

The War God of Bai Zhan was in his living room. In a crop top. And he looked pissed. Absolutely breathtaking, and also extremely and very dangerously *pissed.* Shen Yuan had never seen so much of Liu Qingge. The most he had *ever* seen was after their dip in the pond on that succubi mission, where Madam Meiyin told Shen Yuan he would have *two* great loves in his life. Two!! Did that mean he was destined for heartbreak, to watch one of his loves die!?

Also, *where were they!?*

Hello??

"Do you know, Immortal Master? These individuals are deeply in love with you."

That was what she had said, right before Liu Qingge had exploded for *whatever reason,* and then there was the issue with the aphrodisiac… and then the rose pool.

The water had made Liu Qingge's robes cling on to him – not that Shen Yuan was *purposely looking!!* That was nothing compared to the visage now. The war god wore tight skinny jeans that practically plastered to the thick muscles of his thighs and calves. There was a large gap

of skin, with a single mole above his hip bone. With modern standards, the outfit wasn't *that* revealing.

Liu Qingge wore long sleeves, thick boots, and his pants might be considered high-rise.

The problem was that for a *near decade* of his life, Shen Yuan had worn at least what seemed like a dozen layers of clothing, with Liu Qingge *also* wearing a similar amount. And now he wasn't.

And *fuck.* He was *hot.*

In a… perfectly normal way of recognizing that your friend was extremely hot.

Never mind the heat that Shen Yuan felt swimming through his veins.

He would have to consider *that* reaction later.

"Stop. Staring!" Liu Qingge hissed through his teeth, face mottled red.

"Liu-shishu," Luo Binghe purred. His face was clean of any tears. How unfair! If Shen Yuan even *thought* of crying, his eyes would be swollen to the size of baseballs!! That's the protagonist-

Wait.

Protagonist rules shouldn't *work* here. It wasn't Luo Binghe's world. Why was he still impossibly attractive!?

"I'll get you another shirt," Shen Yuan told him, "just… don't kill each other." He escaped into his bedroom, and had to catch himself against the wall as dizziness started to chase him. Ugh.

Behind him, he heard a near predatory laugh from Luo Binghe. "How bold of you, *Qingge~"*

"Y-You-!" Liu Qingge grit out.

"You're the one half-naked-"

Something crashed against the wall.

"Do *not* break down my house!" Shen Yuan yelled, voice sharp. The two had *already* left a mess in the bamboo house! His apartment was *off limits!!*

Uneasy silence followed after his sharp warning. He rushed to his closet, throwing on the light overhead. His closet was sparse in comparison to his computer room. He never really had a reason, or a want, to dive into fashion. Most of his outfits were just a vague variety of some sweatshirt or sweater and jeans. Though, in his high school years, he used to wear overly large t-shirts. There, in the back of a drawer, he found one.

By the time he came back out into his living room, he had to use the wall as a support. He had pushed himself too far, getting up and down too quickly, and his body ached in protest. Luo Binghe broke his staring contest with Liu Qingge to throw Shen Yuan a worried glance. He stepped across the room to take his elbow. “Yuan-gege? Are you alright?”

Shen Yuan blinked, and his face colored. He was back to this “gege” bullshit?! “Binghe!” He scorned. “There’s no need for that!”

A pleased grin lit up Luo Binghe’s lips.

Liu Qingge drew a sharpened gaze between the two of them, still attempting to hold the ends of his shirt down.

With a light shake of his head, Shen Yuan turned to the embarrassed war god and offered the shirt. “Here. This should be better. There’s a bathroom right there.” He pointed.

After a moment’s hesitation, Liu Qingge tore across the room. He snatched up the shirt and disappeared into the bathroom. The door closed with a slam.

Shen Yuan blinked after his disappearance. His eyebrows fell together. “Binghe?”

“Mm?”

“The hospital… you don’t remember going to that room at all, do you?” Shen Yuan asked. He paused, and clarified, “The room with my father. The man on the phone.”

All the humor swept off Luo Binghe’s face. “That was your *father?”*

Shen Yuan blinked up at him. What sort of reaction was *that!?* Was it that hard to believe that Shen Yuan had a family!? “Yes?”

“He-“ Luo Binghe struggled with his words, before he gave Shen Yuan a concerned look. “This Binghe thought you two were strangers.”

Oh. “Uh.” Shen Yuan shifted on his feet. “No. Anyways. Do you remember how you got there?”

The concern did not fade. It stayed ever-present as Luo Binghe answered, “No. We were in the alley, and I…”

His expression darkened.

Uh-oh.

Was Luo Binghe finally remembering everything that Shen Qingqiu had done to him!? There was no way Shen Yuan stood a *chance* against the protagonist now, cultivation or not. As Shen Qingqiu, he might have to deal with Without a Cure, but at least the peak lord was a little bad ass!

But then why did his disciple cry in the room just now…

Who benefited from that act?

Wait.

Was… that guilt?

Had Shen Yuan been misreading him?

“It’s not your fault,” Shen Yuan told him, almost experimentally.

Luo Binghe quickly corrected his expression and smiled. “There was that big qi explosion, and then darkness. And then that room with Yuan-gege!”

Ignoring his blush, Shen Yuan said, “Just now, you almost had a qi-deviation with Xin Mo, and it brought us here. This time… it appears Liu-shidi got pulled in as well. Considering his… reaction, I tend to think he does not know how he got here, either.”

A deep frown settled over Luo Binghe’s lips. “This… disciple… is extremely sorry. He should not have lost control.”

There was that expression again! Had he been reading Luo Binghe wrong *this entire time?!* “Binghe,” he soothed, raising a hand to pat his shoulder. His head was too high! “You did not cause any real harm. Xin Mo took advantage of the situation. All things considered, this is the better alternative. We just… have to figure out how to get *back.”*

Before Luo Binghe could answer, the door to the bathroom slammed open.

Liu Qingge stood, fuming.

Ah. This shirt… was somehow worse.

It covered most of his stomach, sure. There was only the barest hint of skin there. The problem with this shirt was that it was *too tight.* It ran over Liu Qingge’s form like paint.

Shen Yuan’s mouth dried.

There was *nothing* left to the imagination.

“This. Is. Worse.” Liu Qingge grit through his teeth. He looked as if he might smash something, and that something might be Shen Yuan.

Panic seized him. His mouth ran before his mind caught up. “It’s not *my* fault you two have the body shape and size of some sort of…” Shen Yuan threw his hands in the air. “*Sex gods!”*

Oh.

Oh no.

He did not just say that.

Liu Qingge's mouth dropped open, and certainly a sound was supposed to accompany it but nothing did.

"'You two?'" Luo Binghe asked, looking quite proud of himself.

Shen Yuan *really* said that. Aloud. With his mouth.

He was mortified.

After a few moments of long, drawn out silence, Luo Binghe took pity on them both. He shrugged out of his leather jacket, and then slipped out of his zip-up. "Here," he said, and tossed it over to his shishu. "Until we can get you something better."

Liu Qingge looked as if he might protest. He considered the jacket, then his shirt, and pulled it on. His face was bright red, even as he glared at the zipper.

"Oh," Shen Yuan said. Right then and there he decided to pretend he never said anything. Ever. Not once in his life had he ever spoken words! He certainly would never string together the words "sex" and "god." Nope! Not him. He closed the distance between them. "Let me." He plucked the ends of the jacket and set the zipper. "I actually hate zip-ups. They're ridiculously difficult." Plus, sometimes the joints in his hands hurt far too much for the coordination required to use the zipper. He smiled, and drew his head back to look his shidi in the eye.

Ugh.

Why was he so short in this body? He had to *really* crane his neck.

So!!! Unfair!

Liu Qingge stared down at him. "Shen… Qingqiu?"

Shen Yuan stiffened. How did they keep guessing???

"Looks like Qingge isn't as thick-headed as people say," Luo Binghe said with a sharpened smirk.

Eyes snapping up, the war god's jaw tightened. "You! *Disrespectful!!"*

"What?" Luo Binghe asked in mock affront. "Was it not Qingge who spoke so familiar to this Binghe first?" He fluttered his lashes.

Anger flared in Liu Qingge's eyes. "What is this place? What the *hell* did you do, you-" He moved to go past Shen Yuan, shoving him as he went.

As Shen Qingqiu, that would have been nothing.

Unfortunately, that little jostle was everything. Shen Yuan stumbled, surprised, and threw out a hand to try and catch himself. He bit back any sound as he slammed into a set of shelves. A soft hiss escaped through his teeth.

Liu Qingge froze.

There was a dark look in Luo Binghe's eyes. Ah. Yeah. That look was different and it *definitely* wasn't guilt — not this time. That was the full power of the black lotus! "This Binghe heard that Liu Qingge was-"

Whatever Luo Binghe was *about* to say wouldn't be good for Shen Yuan *or* his apartment. He quickly interrupted, "Binghe! Please!" He paused as two pairs of eyes snapped to him. "I…" Fuck. The full power of their attention, *from both of them,* was very nervewrecking! "I am hungry." He wasn't, really. Though he would have to eat a meal if he wanted to take any medication — and a meal wasn't a bad idea. If time continued to move on in either world, their bodies would still need nutrition. That was… if they all had two different bodies in both worlds.

Judging by the fact that Liu Qingge didn't have a bruised cheek, and that they were in different clothes, they probably *were* in different bodies.

How come only Shen Yuan got a downgrade!?

How was that fair!!??

Luo Binghe brightened. He looked like a kid who just got told he was going to an expensive amusement park. "This disciple will prepare a meal for Shizun!"

"For *everyone,* please," Shen Yuan corrected, sternly.

There was the slightest pout. Luo Binghe threw an annoyed look at the war god.

"I wonder if Luo Binghe's cooking will make Liu-shidi smile again," Shen Yuan said, attempting to say it nonchalantly as if thinking aloud. He ignored the cutting look from Liu Qingge and pushed away from the book shelf. Bruises started to smart his arms and side. Oh well.

"It will not!" Liu Qingge grumbled.

Taking it as a challenge, Luo Binghe grinned. "This disciple will prepare food right away!" He swept around the kitchen island and started diving through all the cupboards with vigor.

Shen Yuan turned away to hide the way his lips curled. He eased back across the room and settled down in a large and plush arm chair. His body sank. Ah! He missed this chair. It was so difficult not to just completely dissolve into a useless puddle.

After a moment of staring, Liu Qingge disappeared into the bathroom. He came back out with a damp towel and stomped over to Shen Yuan, shoving it into his face.

Shen Yuan stared at it.

"Your face. Blood." Liu Qingge glared at him.

“Oh.” Shen Yuan took the warm rag. His face heated. “Is that how you knew?” He scrubbed his face, watching as the bright white rag turned into a horror prop.

Liu Qingge frowned. “No.”

“How then?” Shen Yuan asked. He thought he had finished cleaning up the mess. What an awful thing for Luo Binghe to wake up to!! Not to mention it being Liu Qingge’s first time seeing him as… this!

(There really shouldn’t have been a first time.)

There was a twisted look on Liu Qingge’s face. It almost looked like some sort of constipation. He sighed and held out a hand.

Confused, Shen Yuan handed him the rag.

“You didn’t… get it all.” Liu Qingge dropped down beside the chair, and held the rag between them.

Shen Yuan’s heart leaped into his throat. He was going to wipe his face for him!? “Oh.”

Liu Qingge waited.

It was an offer, not a demand. It would be easy to tell him no, and take the rag and hobble off to the bathroom to finish. Except then Shen Yuan would have to get up again, and there were bruises on his side and his body ached and…

And Liu Qingge was right there already.

He was kneeling for Shen Yuan.

This was ridiculous! Shen Yuan opened his mouth to tell his shidi he didn’t have to worry.

But Liu Qingge ran out of patience. He took Shen Yuan’s chin with a delicate hold, and carefully maneuvered his head back and forth as he scrubbed away the last bits of blood. He was achingly gentle.

Shen Yuan’s face was bright red. It probably was *not* helping to find any left-over flecks.

“It’s… you,” His shidi told him.

“Mm?”

Coloring, Liu Qingge scowled. “How I knew. It’s easy. It’s just you. How you act.”

Shen Yuan did not know how to respond to that. The two of them had barely exchanged a few sentences before Liu Qingge figured it out. How could he tell from such a small interaction?! What sort of tells did Shen Yuan have??

With one final swipe, Liu Qingge jolted to his feet. He held the rag in a fist, and said, “There.” He paused, struggling for a second, and added, “Sorry. For pushing you.” He left, stomping away to go deal with the soiled rag.

Shen Yuan’s heart continued to pound in his chest. He forced his hands to stay in his lap, so he wouldn’t trace the tingling afteraffects of Liu Qingge’s touch. He wasn’t some female lead in some sort of drama!! Why was he reacting like this?! He let out a long breath and dared a glance towards the kitchen.

Standing in the middle, Luo Binghe studied a pitiful pile of ingredients. All of his previous excitement was now just gloom.

“Do… I not have food?” Shen Yuan asked.

“This disciple has failed you…” Luo Binghe murmured, miserably. Most of the words were inaudible, but Shen Yuan knew his disciple enough to figure out what he might have said.

“No, that’s on me,” Shen Yuan said with a heavy sigh. He hated grocery shopping and cooking in general. It was easier just to order pre-made food or eat snacks. “We’ll order food. That’s okay. Come here and sit down.”

“I can still make tea!” His disciple said with burning determination.

Shen Yuan smiled at him. “That would be wonderful. Thank you, Binghe.” He pulled out his phone and started fishing through delivery apps. There was a delicate balance of figuring out what sort of food he wanted Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge to try, and what menus had something he could actually eat. He was still scrolling when Liu Qingge came back from hiding in the bathroom, and Luo Binghe finished the tea. Three mismatched cups sat in the middle of the coffee table, steaming with freshly brewed tea.

“This one is yours, Qingge,” Luo Binghe said, fluttering his eyelashes.

“Wh-“ Liu Qingge’s voice was strangled.

Shen Yuan glanced up. He only had a few blissful moments of wondering what was so wrong about a cup of tea until he realized what mug it was.

A provocative image was spread across its face: Luo Binghe stripped near bare with his muscles glistening with sweat. He was grinning with a sultry wink. It was a gag gift his sister gave him, and he had shoved it far back into the corners of his cupboard because she made him promise he wouldn’t throw it away.

Choking on air, Shen Yuan moved before either of them could. He snatched the cup, so thoroughly embarrassed he couldn’t even form words. Before anyone could say anything, he fled to the kitchen. Behind him, Luo Binghe was doing his best imitation of innocence and Liu Qingge was probably succumbing to a stroke.

Shen Yuan wanted to die. Again.

He deposited the cup onto the counter and dropped behind the safety of the island, hiding his face in his hands. *Fuck, fuck, fuck. You're fucking kidding me!! Of all fucking cups!!! Binghe!!!!!*

"What?!" The war god finally managed, sounding outraged. "Y-You!"

Shen Yuan squeezed his eyes shut and allowed himself a few more seconds to drown in humiliation. Then he took in a big breath, stood up, and got a different cup. "Luo Binghe," he called, forcing his voice to sound reprimanding and calm. "Stop provoking your shishu." As he transferred the tea into another *completely appropriate* cup, he heard a strange sound.

A laugh.

On the couch, Luo Binghe fell back and was *laughing.* His hand rested on his stomach. The laughter was free and joyous. It was the same laugh Shen Yuan had only started to pull from Luo Binghe before the Immortal Alliance Conference in the rarest of moments.

This might have been at his expense, but he somehow was no longer regretting that stupid cup.

Well. He didn't regret it for one or two seconds. Then his cheeky disciple had to choke out through his giggles, "W-Why does-" *Wheeze.* "-Sh-Shizun have that!?"

Liu Qingge's affronted ire now pinned directly on Shen Yuan, as if he were the one who personally delivered the inappropriate mug to his hands.

Partially to give himself a few moments to respond, Shen Yuan found another hiding spot for the cup and shoved it in the far back. It would *not* be seeing the light of day ever again. He cleared his throat, grabbed his cane, and made his way back to the sitting area with as much dignity as he could pretend to have. "My sister thought it would be a hilarious gift."

Well. Really, despite it thoroughly wrecking Shen Yuan's integrity, it at least had its intended effect. She probably would have cried laughing so hard if he told her–

It hit Shen Yuan right then that he could see his sister again. Homesickness cut into his lungs, and he almost forgot to breathe until he plopped back down into his chair.

Both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe were staring at him now.

It took him a few moments to gather himself. Sitting up straight, he narrowed his eyes. "You don't believe me?" he asked, an eyebrow raised pointedly. He refused to admit to buying any salacious pictures of the protagonist.

"Yuan-gege has a sister?" Luo Binghe gaped.

Oh. Shen Yuan dropped his eyes to his tea. "Yes. And two brothers. Though I haven't seen either in…" The corners of his lips drooped. It had only been two days in this world – technically three now. Except that for Shen Yuan, it had been so much longer. It had been years. "A really long time. I also have a mother and a father, which may be a shock, I know."

No one said anything, not for a long while.

“...can Shizun explain now?” Luo Binghe asked, voice low. He had a desperate, pitiful shine in his eyes.

“Yes.” Liu Qingge glowered, as if perturbed to agree with Luo Binghe. “Explain. Now.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

3,600-ish words and a roughly 18 minute reading time.

No content warnings. Nothing too out of the realm here, I believe.

There was a delicate allure to the man in the chair. The way he held the mug of tea was with effortless grace, a mirror to Shen Qingqiu. It was no question who this man really was. He blushed more easily, had his hair cut short, and had dark circles under his eyes; but it was *him.* Through and through. Liu Qingge could not look at him for too long. He wore inappropriate clothing.

The collar of his top was so loose. Shadows played against the cords of a thin neck. Collarbones traced to delicate shoulders, disappearing underneath the thin fabric. It was such a small thing that left Liu Qingge breathless.

With everything else going on, he should be more bothered about the fact that he was lost in an alien place without his cultivation. He should be figuring things out, and finding a way back. Instead, it didn't seem to matter *what* body Shen Qingqiu had morphed into, Liu Qingge was still… distracted around him.

"...I'll explain," Shen Qingqiu said, eyebrows tightening together. "After I order food. It will take a while to get here, and we should eat something."

Liu Qingge studied him. The only tell that his shixiong might be somewhat anxious was a slight quiver in his fingertips as he set the tea down and pulled out a little black box. It was the one he was playing with earlier. Liu Qingge leaned in, trying to get a peek at what he was staring at.

"Oh," Shen Qingqiu said, surprised. His eyes lifted and he glanced between Liu Qingge and his disciple. "Here." He eased himself up onto his feet, forgetting his cane, and stepped to the couch. He sank into it next to Liu Qingge. "Come, Binghe." He patted the space on his other side.

Now that there wasn't the looming threat of anyone dying or anyone being scandalously dressed, Liu Qingge got the chance to really *look* at his shixiong's disciple. The only times he had mildly paid attention to the brat was whenever he swung by his shixiong's, mostly to help circulate his meridians. He remembered the first time that he had ever seen Luo Binghe.

So young, yet already brimming with potential. It was odd to see Shen Qingqiu go from scorning the boy to favoring him. And now that boy was somehow a man.

That happened to people, yes.

But Luo Binghe *died*. It had destroyed Shen Qingqiu.

Not that his shixiong would never admit that. Liu Qingge had watched him for years, and knew his shixiong's moods. Most of them, that is. He felt selfish and hungry to want to know all of them. Not that he had ever wanted to witness Shen Qingqiu's grief. Sometimes grief was a solitary thing. At least, it was to his shixiong. There was nothing that Liu Qingge could do for him. (Did he even try hard enough?) It only made him angrier that Luo Binghe had stayed away for so long.

And now Luo Binghe was back and *alive,* and… a grown man. An irritating man. A shameless, disrespectful, *handsome-*

What.

Luckily, Liu Qingge was distracted from his own thoughts.

His shixiong was *too* lenient on his teachings, because his brat of a disciple sat so close he practically shoved the small man into Liu Qingge's own lap.

Color drenched Shen Qingqiu's pale skin, and his ears turned a vibrant red. He murmured some sort of reprimand to Luo Binghe, who blinked innocently and pouted, "This disciple just wants to see better!"

"Shameless," Liu Qingge murmured without heat. He was too focused on calming his heart. Really, he wasn't sure who the "shameless" was for.

"Sorry, Liu-shidi."

There were some words. As well as some questions. Liu Qingge did not remember how he answered any of them. All he could think of was Shen Qingqiu's body heat, and the thin fabric of his top, and the way their thighs pressed close together. From this angle, the collar of his shixiong's shirt was open enough to let anyone's eyes drop down his chest. Not… that he was looking.

Would Luo Binghe stop *jostling* him into Liu Qingge!?

"What's that?" the brat would ask about *every single* picture, his eyes alight in excitement. It might not be unlike what Liu Qingge felt when he found a new beast to fight. Picking out food, it seems, would take far longer than what his shixiong had initially planned.

After promising his disciple something called "cooking shows", Shen Qingqiu finally settled on a meal for the three of them. He set the little black box on a low table.

It was time now.

Silence stretched. Shen Qingqiu did not look at either of them. He sat with a stiff upper back, shoulders tucked up near his ears, and stared down into his tea cup. Their thighs still pressed together. He was tense.

Almost as tense as Liu Qingge.

“Would either of you like more tea?” his shixiong asked.

“Shizun.” It was a quiet plea, and far more pitiful and real than Liu Qingge had ever heard from the brat.

Eyes shutting, Shen Qingqiu stole himself for a few delicate moments. Then he set his tea down, and stood. He moved with great care in this form, as if each step his body might decide to betray him. His hand braced against the arm of the plush chair and he sank down into it. The cushions nearly swallowed him whole. He grabbed a blanket to drape over his knees, and his hands folded in his lap. “Alright,” he breathed in deeply.

His lips trembled.

Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes. Of all the expressions and moods he had observed on Shen Qingqiu, this one was new. He had no real reference as to what it *could* be. Other than, of course, fear?

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe asked. His eyes darted to Liu Qingge.

He caught his eye. There was something curious about that look. Why would that brat look at him? He frowned. Was he asking for something? At first, Liu Qingge had thought that this was all *Luo Binghe’s* fault. The brat had cried as much — even to go as far as provoking him. Except now, he didn't even know *what* was at fault. The scope of it all had changed. Apparently his shixiong had a sister that existed wherever this was. A sister who gifted him…

…unique things.

Confused, he turned his attention to his shixiong. “Start small,” he said, and leaned back. “Where are we?”

“Uh…” Shen Qingqiu blinked and glanced up at him. “We’re… not in your world. I am sure both of you have guessed. This world has no cultivation.” He drew his eyes across the two of them, studying their expressions in turn. His eyes fell back down to his hands. “There’s also no demons, no magical plants, or…” His voice died out.

Whatever this curse was, it brought his shixiong somewhere he was *familiar* with. Extremely familiar.

“You… have been here before,” Liu Qingge prompted.

His shixiong’s lips pressed into a tight line, discomfort twitching around his body.

“He was born here,” Luo Binghe observed.

All the little pieces of information had pointed to that – but it wasn't possible. Was it? Liu Qingge searched his shixiong for any sign of a lie. The man's breathing had picked up, short and shallow, and he tried to hide the shaking of his hands in his lap. Anyone else might have thought him quiet and calm. They wouldn't know what to look for.

"Luo Binghe is right," Shen Qingqiu murmured. His eyes fluttered shut.

Shock hit him like a piece of glass shattering on the floor, all of its pieces flying into different directions. His thoughts broke into hundreds of tangents, each louder and more demanding than the last. Through the massive mess of his brain, he managed to demand, "Explain."

"My name is Shen Yuan," he said, voice breaking only slightly. "I died."

Shen Yuan. *Shen Yuan.*

The name repeated itself over and over as horror continued to compound into a crescendo of buzzing noise.

I died.

Liu Qingge couldn't breathe. The thought that he-

That Shen-

Died.

"At least, I thought I did. I am not quite sure what is going on anymore. When I died, I transmigrated into someone else."

"Shen Qingqiu," Luo Binghe murmured.

I died. Those two words resounded across his skull. Mouth tight, Liu Qingge asked, "Transmigrated?"

Shen Yuan's mouth opened and shut. He waved a hand through the air, gathering his thoughts in front of him. The motion lacked the flare of a fan. "My soul… got placed into another body. In this case, I was placed in your world. Binghe is right. I… was put into Shen Qingqiu's body."

On the other side of the couch, Luo Binghe was artificially relaxed, lounging on the couch with one arm up on the back of it. One of his legs hooked over the other, foot bouncing in random intervals. The expression on his face was ambivalent and kind. It was fake.

Liu Qingge did not know how he knew that.

Maybe because he has been on the receiving end of so many of this brat's plastic smiles.

"When?" Luo Binghe asked.

That question sparked an epiphany. The qi deviation. Liu Qingge sat up.

All the peak lords had a secret meeting about the changes in the Qing Jing Peak lord. At the time, almost all had agreed the changes were for the better. The only one in minor disagreement was Zhangmen-shixiong, who had tested Shen Qingqiu for possession. Liu Qingge's eyebrows tightened together, and he tried to recall his thoughts at the time. He could not remember. It wasn't in his strong suit to ever really invest too much time or thought into his sect siblings – especially not Shen Qingqiu. The two got along as well as clean silk and oil, and Liu Qingge had no doubt that the man had hated him.

Then one day his cruelty had simply… stopped.

Liu Qingge had wondered if he had always misunderstood his shixiong, especially after his rescue in the Ling Xi Caves.

That moment changed the trajectory of Liu Qingge's life (read: heart) forever.

His eyes lifted and he realized that Shen Yuan was staring at both of them, absorbing both of their reactions to the news. The flutter of his hands was tempered into a white-knuckle grip on his blanket. That was the only sign of anxiety in the man. It would be frightening, wouldn't it? To explain to two people, at once, that he had taken over the body of someone else. Someone who was elevated, and arguably critically important, in their world. How would Zhangmen-shixiong react?

Liu Qingge's hands tightened into fists, *He can never find out.*

That thought surprised him.

Had his loyalty flipped so carelessly?

It's not careless.

"I…" Shen Yuan dropped his gaze and turned away. He sank a little, as if growing smaller. "When I woke for the first time in your world, Shen Qingqiu was sick…"

"You gave me medicine for the first time shortly after," Luo Binghe murmured in surprise.

Liu Qingge nodded. As he suspected. The qi deviation.

Across the room, Shen Yuan fidgeted. He swallowed, shoulders curled, as he tried reading both of their faces.

It was hard marrying him with Shen Qingqiu. Well, perhaps the better way to say that was: it was hard thinking of Shen Yuan as anything *but* Shen Qingqiu and remembering that there was another who had taken residence in that body before him.

Liu Qingge should have some loyalty, shouldn't he? He should be angry for the death of his shixiong, and the subterfuge and lying. Instead all he could think about was re-learning Shen Yuan, and knowing him as who he was and not the mask he hid behind.

He decided in that instant that if Luo Binghe made so much as a twitch against Shen Yuan, he would do anything in his power to protect his shixiong.

“So it *was* Shizun who pushed me,” Luo Binghe murmured with a faraway look in his eyes.

Liu Qingge snapped to attention. *What?*

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan choked on the name. His eyes shined.

The disciples were never privy to Shen Qingqiu’s health, at least not as much as the peak lords were. Luo Binghe must have thought (hoped?) that Shen Yuan’s transmigration happened at a different point.

“Explain,” Liu Qingge demanded. What did Luo Binghe mean “pushed?” The years following the Immortal Conference, Shen Qingqiu was absolutely wrecked with grief. It made him a shadow of the man he was before. Mixed in with that grief, there had been guilt too. Liu Qingge had always assumed it was because his shixiong believed that he had failed his disciple.

What did you do?

“I…” Shen Yuan dared a glance up at them. Guilt and pain shined in his eyes, and he had a hard time looking over at his disciple.

“What happened at the Immortal Conference?” Liu Qingge asked, and he directed this question at Luo Binghe.

The disciple’s hands were shaking and his lips were trembling. Fuck. His eyes were shining.

Fuck.

“I…” Shen Yuan closed his eyes. He breathed in through his nose and sat up. “I pushed Binghe into the Abyss.”

It took a little time for those words to make sense.

They did not make sense.

Liu Qingge leaped from the couch. He prowled around the room, curling his hands into fists. The years following the Immortal Conference were both the worst and best. There had been a few stolen moments between him and Shen Qingqiu, just the two of them. He managed to make his shixiong *laugh* a few times — those memories he held dear to his heart. But even then, he would never trade his shixiong's happiness for a few selfish memories.

“That does not make sense,” Liu Qingge said, throwing a sharp glance to Shen Yuan. “You were bereft. You grieved.”

“…I wouldn’t say *bereft-*“

This man and his *fucking* thin face! “Shen. Q-“ Liu Qingge stopped. “Yuan.”

The two stared another down.

Liu Qingge did not understand. There was no reason for his shixiong to do something so terribly cruel to a disciple that he adored to no end. What could have even prompted such a reaction? Horror started to shrink his lungs. Luo Binghe, that little brat, that poor *child,* had been tossed into the Abyss. *That's* where he had gone? *This entire time?*

"He did it because I am a beast," Luo Binghe spoke, voice void of any real emotion.

"Binghe!"

"I am a d-"

"*There's a System!"* Shen Yuan spoke over him, voice raised and sharp.

The disciple's mouth snapped shut.

"What." Liu Qingge was getting ready to punch something, probably himself to make this all *make sense.*

Shen Yuan paled. He stared down at his hands, looking as if he regretted his outburst. It took a few minutes for him to collect himself, time that Liu Qingge spent trying not to break something. "...there is an entity," he spoke slowly, considering each word, "that… set rules when I transmigrated." He swallowed, and dared a quick glance up at Luo Binghe. "When-" His breath hitched, and his face froze. Considering his words, he gently said, "When Luo Binghe and I met in the alley, he thought I was calling for help…" His voice trailed off again. "Well. I suppose I was. But not in the way he thought I was."

Something had occurred in that alley, and Liu Qingge had to figure out what. But first, he had to figure what the *fuck* happened at the Immortal Conference. And before *that,* he had to figure what the fuck was going on *with an entity?!* As calmly as he could manage, he asked, "What rules?"

Shen Yuan's eyebrows tightened together. "I don't think we really need to get into that."

"This one finds himself very curious about an entity who has *rules* on how his shizun can act," Luo Binghe said in an overly friendly way that somehow also sounded like a threat.

As a child, that sort of tone was just presumptuous and annoying. But coming from an adult…

It was almost intimidating.

Almost… impressive.

Discomfort twitched across Shen Yuan's face. "If you insist."

"This Binghe insists," he said, cheerfully.

Shen Yuan took a deep breath. Then he sighed. "At first I had to attempt to… act like Shen Qingqiu. Until I earned the ability to act with more freedom. More like myself."

That did not sound good. Liu Qingge felt anger begin to curl in his core. “And how did the System think Shen Qingqiu acted?”

His shixiong looked distinctly uncomfortable. He glanced at his disciple, worry adding a wrinkle between his eyebrows. His eyes fell. “There were certain things that I had to do,” Shen Yuan continued, each word halting, “and some things I was not able to do.”

“What would happen if you did not do, or do, these things?” Luo Binghe asked, his smile growing brighter.

It did nothing to ease his shixiong’s discomfort. “...there were…” he corrected, “*are*… repercussions.”

Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes. “What.”

“What sort of repercussions, Yuan-gege?” Luo Binghe asked. Somehow he managed to keep his voice light and airy, meanwhile Liu Qingge wanted to smash the table.

His shixiong did not answer. “It does not matter.” He waved a hand through the air, and again it lacked the added charm of a fan. “That is not the point of this. I…” His eyebrows fell together and his tone became grave. “This one is deeply aggrieved that he could not tell the truth. He did not…” He had been speaking so informally this entire time, it was a shock to hear the sudden switch. “He did not mean to hurt either Liu Qingge or Luo Binghe or anyone else for lying. Sincerely, and deeply regretful, he apologizes.” He pulled the blanket aside and moved.

It took Liu Qingge too long to realize what he was doing.

Luo Binghe moved first. “Shizun!” he cried. He caught his shizun, stopping him from dropping into a low bow.

“I’m sorry,” Shen Yuan whispered. There was water in his eyes that he tried to hide by ducking his head. Even with Luo Binghe keeping a hold on his shoulders, he managed to force his upper body into a bow.

“*Shen-”* Liu Qingge choked out, and stopped himself from adding *Qingqiu.* He quickly corrected and said, “Shen. Yuan. Stop.”

“Shizun, please,” his disciple cried. He dropped to the ground and threw his arms around his shizun’s waist.

Face pinched, Shen Yuan turned away from both of them. “Luo Binghe. I am not your sh-”

“No!” Luo Binghe roared.

Shen Yuan flinched, and Liu Qingge’s hand snapped to summon a sword that wasn’t there. The room leadened with strained silence.

“Shizun is Shizun!” The disciple’s voice became wet. He buried his face in his shizun’s side. “Don’t… don’t say you’re not. *Please.*”

“Binghe…”

The look on Shen Yuan’s face was far too vulnerable. It was full of pain and regret. He looked close to breaking.

Neither were talking like they *needed* to. It was pissing Liu Qingge off.

He moved. In a few steps, he reached the mess on the floor and slid down beside the chair. His hand caught the back of Shen Yuan’s head, forcing their eyes to meet. “Did you want to push Luo Binghe into the Abyss?”

The sudden touch surprised his shixiong as much as it surprised himself.

“No!” Shen Yuan was appalled. “No, but-“

“What was the punishment for *not* pushing Luo Binghe?” Liu Qingge demanded.

Shen Yuan’s face shuddered with shock.

Was it really that surprising that Liu Qingge connected the dots? “There was one,” he said slowly, hoping to ground his shixiong *and* his needy and traumatized disciple. Someone had to keep their fucking head. “There is no other reason why you would.” At least, no other reason that actually *mattered.* Luo Binghe had a secret. That much was clear to anyone with half a brain.

(Well, really, the brat had attempted to confess to it *twice* and his shizun interrupted both times. Those two were not fucking subtle.)

“It’s no excuse,” Shen Yuan croaked, his throat thick. “It doesn’t matter what the System said. It wasn’t worth it. I was weak, I shouldn’t have-“

“*Shen. Yuan.”* Liu Qingge dragged his face closer, glaring. “What. Was. The. *Fucking.* Punishment?”

With a slight gasp, his shixiong stopped looking him in the eye. He gulped. His hands spasmed. “…death.”

That was what he had thought. Luo Binghe needed to *hear* it, and Shen Yuan needed to *stop blaming himself.* Why was it up to Liu Qingge to get them to stop being idiots? He was bad at this! There was a reason he spent a bulk of his time fighting monsters. Fights had a clear set of rules he knew, and he understood *how* he fucked up if he ever did.

But people? Conversations? *Feelings?*

There were no rules for those things. And he always fucked them up.

Liu Qingge dropped his hand. He wanted to kill something. That *something* was “the System.” He turned his head away, not quite sure what to do with Shen Yuan’s wet eyes. It was best to give him a moment to gather himself.

He should move.

Instead, he reached out a hand and pressed it against Shen Yuan's back to-

Ah.

Fuck.

He was going to circulate his shixiong's meridians, but neither had any cultivation. So now it was just awkward.

Throat tight, he experimented and rubbed one small circle on his shixiong's back. He wore too little fabric, and it was too easy to feel his bones.

To his shock, Shen Yuan *leaned into* the touch.

Liu Qingge ignored the way his heart fluttered.

The strange reaction made him want to leap up and run away.

He forced himself to stay.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

3,300 words, 14 min reading time.

New guest appearance!

CW: Self-hate, Negative Thoughts, the Binghe Special

"...death."

Two and a half years. Over nine hundred days. Twenty-one thousand hours that Luo Binghe spent flipping between desolate heartbreak and betrayed outrage. *Why why why why,* he had asked countless times. He had cried, he had screamed, he had broken down, and he had *fought.*

All on his own.

Some nights he would torture himself, force himself to live through the Immortal Conference all over again, to study the expression on his shizun's face and watch as it turned and shut him out.

He had *agonized* over what he had done wrong and why the single person – the *only* person left who loved him and knew him and cared for him – cast him aside as if he were nothing better than a piece of rotten fruit.

Death.

It hurt to breathe. Every single breath was ragged and stripped his lungs raw. Heat boiled the backs of his eyes, and the tip of his nose burned with his disbelief and tears. After all this time, by some divine grace, he was back in his shizun's arms and he finally had an answer. His heart still sat fragmented in his chest, sharp edges digging into his soul with every single desperate gasp. But…

There was a chance…

A chance he might *heal.*

“....Shizun…” Luo Binghe whispered, voice breaking. A weight landed softly on the back of his head. His eyes fluttered shut. Tears scorched pathways down his cheeks. He clutched onto Shen Yuan, greedily. What he really wanted was to drag him closer until it no longer was *Luo Binghe* and *Shen Yuan,* and instead was just *them*. “Shizun… did not want to throw this Binghe away?”

“Oh, Binghe…” The hand on Luo Binghe’s head started to comb through his hair. “No. This master did not want to.”

Luo Binghe wished he planned the broken sound that escaped his lips. It was rough and pathetic.

“Oh, my little sheep…” Shen Yuan whispered. “I… am so sorry.”

Those words weren’t enough to mend these last few years, but it was a start. Luo Binghe wished he had more control over himself. He did not. He was weak, selfish, and greedy. So incredibly greedy. He breathed in a wet, trembling breath. His tongue curled to form words, but instead a sob broke free from him and shuddered his shoulders.

A soft, hushing sound came from above him. Comfort settled around him like a tentative fog, with a gentle hand combing through his hair and the other rubbing circles into his back.

It took a while for Luo Binghe to gather himself, to be able to speak the question he needed to ask. “Shizun… Shizun does not hate this Binghe…?”

For the first time since this conversation started, Shen Yuan had a hint of a smile in his voice. “No,*”* he consoled, “No, Binghe. This master could never hate you.”

It was like taking the pieces of his shattered heart and gradually sewing them back together.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe started to speak again, and his voice turned into a wet mess of a sob. He had to take in a shuddering breath, attempting to gain some semblance of control. “Shizun does not think… this Binghe a lowly beast? Undeserving of his shizun’s care?”

“*Binghe,”* Shen Yuan admonished. “You are *not* a beast. You are more than deserving. It is this master who has failed you.”

“No,” Luo Binghe croaked. He knew he was getting snot and tears all over Shen Yuan’s clothes. He did not have the willpower to stop. There was still so much more he needed to ask. His throat was swollen with emotion, and so many questions wanted to leak through his mouth. He was forced to pick and choose. “Then why did Shizun run? Why did he hide from this Binghe? Why…?”

The hand on his head stilled.

“I…” Shen Yuan sighed. The petting resumed. “Binghe.”

Luo Binghe rolled just enough to catch sight of his shizun’s expression. It was tight with discomfort. “This one does not understand-” His vision blurred as more tears spilled over.

A soft tutting sound left Shen Yuan. He used his thumb to clear away some of Luo Binghe's tears, revealing the quietest of smiles on his lips. "Binghe. What is someone *supposed* to think when you barge into their room at midnight?"

That… made sense. Still, Luo Binghe pouted and could not stop himself from bitterly saying, "Shizun called for Qingge." He spotted the man sitting uncomfortably close to *his* shizun, and touching him! A bitter jealousy soured his tongue.

"...insolent!" The war god snapped, face reddening. He threw Luo Binghe a glare that he ignored.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan sighed, again. "Of course this master was expecting Liu-shidi. We were sleeping together."

The floor fell out from underneath Luo Binghe. He stared at his shizun in disbelief.

On the other side of his shizun, Liu Qingge made a strangled noise.

Envy and a weak sense of betrayal tore into Luo Binghe. It was such a powerful flare of jealousy he had *never* felt before. He threw an acidic scowl towards the other man, wanting to tear out his throat.

"*...two beds!"* Liu Qingge choked, not noticing the death glare at all. He stared aghast at his shixiong. "Two *beds! Shen. YUAN."*

"What?" Shen Yuan glanced up at him, startled.

Before they could continue down *that* line of questioning, the little black box on the table started rumbling. His shizun hummed. He leaned forward, plucking it off the table. "That must be for the food. They always get confused…" He manipulated the screen with one hand, and continued to wipe away Luo Binghe's tears with the other. Most of his attention was on Liu Qingge, though, with a clear question on his face.

Ah.

Just like Shizun to somehow *completely miss* the obvious.

"Don't say it like that!" Liu Qingge said through his teeth, practically a glowing light with his embarrassment.

Luo Binghe found a smirk on the corner of his lips. *Cute,* he thought. Then he was startled that he thought it at *all.*

"Say what like *what?* We were sleeping together! What else do you want me to say? We slept together countless times before!"

"Shen. *Yuan."*

Now that Luo Binghe understood the situation, it took just about every single ounce of willpower *not* burst out laughing. This time the tears in his eyes were from suppressing his

giggles. As innocently as he could, he blinked up at Shen Yuan and asked, "*Countless times?* Yuan-gege and Qingge are so prolific!"

Shen Yuan stared at Luo Binghe in complete and utter bafflement.

It almost broke him.

"*...Luo. Binghe!!!"* Liu Qingge cried. He lunged towards him.

Before the two could start anything, all three of them heard, "...San-ge??"

Both the war god and Luo Binghe froze.

"Meimei?" Shen Yuan asked, startled. He spoke to the black box.

"San-ge? Can you hear me now?"

"It's you!" Shen Yuan exclaimed, unfiltered emotion drenching his voice. His face stretched from tearful joy to uncertainty.

"Yeah, it's *me,* dummy! All I see are boogers right now. What show are you watching? It sounds *super* gay."

Many things happened at once.

The first: Shen Yuan fumbled with the black box, and it fell towards Luo Binghe's face. The second: Liu Qingge caught the box before it did any damage and stared at it critically.

The third: "*Yuan-ge! That's a man! Like. A real life man!"*

The fourth: Shen Yuan spasmed and tried to grab the phone. Then he froze and realized his shirt was covered in blood. He began to squirm and he called out, "Give me a second!" In his haste to get up, he managed to accidentally throw his cane. He wasn't strong enough to dislodge Luo Binghe.

The fifth: Luo Binghe did the only sensible thing in the moment. (It was sensible, alright?) He took off his own shirt and offered it to his shizun.

It wasn't that bad.

In fact, he had *another* shirt underneath.

The sixth, and the *most mind boggling:*

Shen Yuan took off his *own* shirt.

There was so much skin.

There was so much skin.

Whatever happened after that — well. Luo Binghe's brain had stopped the second he laid eyes on the expanse of his shizun's chest. That image was burned inside of his mind, and he would never forget it. Ever.

He met eyes with Liu Qingge.

They stared at another.

"…would you *shut up?* You're on speaker!" Shen Yuan snapped.

"You have *two men* at your apartment, Yuan-ge! You were talking about sleeping with them?!"

"Don't say it like that!" Shen Yuan snapped, color flooding his cheeks.

Ah. Now he gets it?

"Yuan-ge!" His sister whined. "You told me you were going to die a vir-"

The noise Shen Yuan made was extremely undignified. (And, yes. It was extremely adorable.) He slammed the black box, and his sister's voice cut off.

"*What."* The war god's voice cracked.

Luo Binghe grinned. Nothing sobered him up more than complete and utter fucking chaos. All of his earlier pain was just a quiet ache at the moment, retreating until it could all unfold itself later.

"Just." Shen Yuan threw his hands up in the air. "Hold. *On."*

The black box started vibrating again.

All three of them stared at it.

"That's my sister," his shizun explained.

"It is a device that allows long distance communication?" Liu Qingge clarified.

Luo Binghe raised his eyebrows. He was half expecting the war god to ask, *Your sister is a box?* He was half considering it himself, if just for the fun of it.

"A phone. It is a *phone.* And it's a video call. Which means we can see her and she will see us, now *please,* don't say or do anything. Like. Maybe… not speak at all?" Shen Yuan winced.

"We'll be on our *best* behavior, Yuan-gege," Luo Binghe said, fluttering his lashes.

His shizun had an expression that said he would rather jump from the balcony. With a heavy and resigned sigh, he picked up the phone and poked the screen.

"…*so* much trouble! You *best* be ready to square up! I'll be there in fifteen!"

“You will *not!”* Shen Yuan snapped.

“*Yuan-ge,”* his sister whined. “It’s been two whole days and you went AWOL, and now there’s two men in your apartment?”

“Stop saying it like that,” Shen Yuan sighed. All of his earlier flustered panic disappeared behind a tight and controlled mask. “They’re… friends.”

“Friends, ge? You don’t have friends.”

Shen Yuan winced. “Wow.”

“What?! You’re the one who got all morbid, saying that you’re just leaving people behind. That there was no point in dragging people down…”

Curiosity won. Luo Binghe moved to sit beside his shizun, and he leaned in to set his chin on his shizun’s shoulder. The audacity of the contact made his heart spasm delightedly. On the front of the phone was a young woman. She was maybe sixteen, and looked exactly like Shen Yuan, if not a healthier and more expressive version. She stopped midsentence, her eyes snapping to Luo Binghe.

“Hi,” she said, voice turning sugary sweet.

“Hello,” Luo Binghe smiled at her in turn.

Once again, his shizun sighed.

His sister flashed him a *look* with wide eyes.

“Shut up,” Shen Yuan groaned.

“Ge???” His sister cried. “*Ge?”*

“Okay. Nope.” He shoved Luo Binghe away and tried to ease up off the floor.

“I want to see the other one. I saw him for like two seconds.”

“Nope.”

“*San-ge!”*

Shen Yuan stilled at the whine in her voice. He flashed Liu Qingge an apologetic look.

After a moment’s hesitation, the war god nodded and held out his hand. It took him a few moments to angle the phone correctly, and he stared curiously at the face on it.

“…hi,” the sister said shyly.

“Hi.” Liu Qingge echoed. His eyes flashed to his shixiong.

Grinning, Luo Binghe slid across the floor and bumped shoulders with the war god. He leaned in, which resulted in the two of their heads resting together. The sister gave a little giggle at the display. He said, “Hello!”

“Hi!!”

“We are *not* doing this,” Shen Yuan frowned. “You saw them. Alright, mei?”

Ignoring him, his sister waved at the two of them. “Hi!”

“Hello!!” Luo Binghe waved back eagerly.

Both Luo Binghe and the sister looked pointedly at Liu Qingge.

Cringing, the war god muttered, “Hi.”

Giggles spilled from the black box. “Are you two really friends with Yuan-ge? Like. For real?”

Luo Binghe thought for a few moments, remembering a term he heard the nurses use. He perked up and said, “Boyfriends!”

The phone disappeared from their hands in an instant, snatched by Shen Yuan. It was screeching again.

“Ge?????????!!!!!!”

His shizun attempted damage control, using the furniture to escape the room. The back of his neck was crimson. He stepped back into the strange room with all the paintings and slammed the door.

“Get. *Off.”* Liu Qingge shoved Luo Binghe. “Shameless!”

He let him, and sank to the ground giggling under his breath. Watching the war god with a smirk, he rested his head in his hand.

They stared at another, with his smile growing with every passing second and the war god’s frown deepening. The next words to leave the man’s mouth was one of the most astounding things Luo Binghe had ever heard in his life:

“Are you alright?”

The question threw Luo Binghe. It knocked off his grin.

Earlier the mood had drastically flipped from him slowly stringing the pieces of his heart back together to the sudden chaos that was Shen Yuan’s sister. Suddenly it was just him and his shishu and a question he had never once expected from the fucking War God of Bai Zhan Peak.

“It is a lot,” Liu Qingge said, as if that explained anything.

Luo Binghe was at a loss. He didn't know how to interact with his shishu — not if he wasn't trying to anger him. Being asked that question… as if his shishu *cared*...

What would Liu Qingge even do if he was not alright? What was the point in asking? It's not as if the war god planned to bring him into his arms and soothe him the way that his shizun had.

Well. There was only one way to find out, right?

"No," Luo Binghe said, and found a bit of honesty in his words when he said, "I'm not alright."

Liu Qingge nodded, face still impassive and as hard to read as ever. It was a nice face. Sharp, yet delicate. Beautiful. Dark eyes searched for something on Luo Binghe's face. Were they outlined with some sort of paint? It seemed so. After the war god was satisfied, he abruptly stood. Then he plucked the mugs from the table, and disappeared into the kitchen.

Sounds like splashing water and scraping ceramic trickled across the room. Beyond the door, Shen Yuan's muffled voice rose. It was stern and loud — and somehow *looser.* Less rigid with formality. Ever since they had stepped into this world, it was like his shizun was able to breathe. He let a few of his masks fall away.

Luo Binge wondered to himself, for a moment, if he was disappointed that his master was so different here; that "Shen Qingqiu" was just an *act.* He let that sit for a while, and came to a solid decision.

He was not disappointed.

Warmth unfurled in his chest.The second he was welcomed into the bamboo house, he had been fed crumbs of the *real* Shen Yuan. It left him greedy, starving, and full of *want.* He ached to tear through more masks; he needed a buffet. More than anything he wanted to pull every last layer away from his shizun and know the truth of the man that hid beneath it all.

"Get up," Liu Qingge ordered.

Opening his eyes, Luo Binghe spotted the war god standing over him with three mugs.

Eyes narrowed, Liu Qingge nodded towards the couch. "Move."

There were several ways this could go. Luo Binghe decided to humor whatever this was, and pulled himself up on the couch. As he settled down, Liu Qingge set down the mugs and plucked up a blanket. He wrapped it around Luo Binghe, then shoved a mug of tea into his hands. Dumbfounded, Luo Binghe stared down into the tea.

What?

A moment later, Liu Qingge sighed. He sat down on the table, in front of Luo Binghe, and looked him in the eye. "You did not deserve what happened to you."

What.

“You… care for your shizun,” Liu Qingge said, haltingly, “but that does not take away what you went through. Ask for what you need. You’re a disciple of the Cang Qiong Sect. We’re here to take care of you.”

Luo Binghe felt his skin tighten with a rush of emotion. His throat clogged. The tip of his nose prickled.

“Spoiled,” Liu Qingge added, with a frown. “Shameless and insolent. But still under our care.” He wavered. “*His* care.”

“Liu-shishu?” Luo Binghe asked, surprised. His vision blurred.

“*He* may let you cling on to him, *I* will not.” Liu Qingge threw up a hand, as if to prevent Luo Binghe from launching at him.

It honestly was a very real possibility. The swell of emotions in his chest startled him. Fresh tears spilled down his cheeks. He hadn’t expected *this.* He had never expected anything from his shishu. The only thing anyone ever expected from the war god was violence. Luo Binghe felt a little chastened to realize that he was one of those people who saw only one side of Liu Qingge. He had so much more depth to him; more than his battle expertise and his rage.

A strange new feeling seeded in the pit of Luo Binghe’s stomach. All at once, after all of these years, he found himself hungry for something other than his shizun. His skin prickled. If he were honest with himself, he would admit it scared him. He had depended on one person for so long, with that one person being the scope of his entire world. It was hard to see anyone else, much less let them in. Yet somehow, amazingly, Liu Qingge had managed to shift the balance of his world. He had a foot in the door.

Was Luo Binghe perhaps *encouraging* his tears? Maybe. He ducked his chin, and made sure his soft intake of breath was loud and miserable, as an *experiment.* The cup shook in his hands, and tea sloshed around the sides.

Liu Qingge let out a strange noise. He sighed, taking the tea away. Then he plopped down beside him on the couch, looking extremely uncomfortable. “Fine.”

Making certain to shrink, Luo Binghe turned a confused glance to his shishu. He trembled his lower lip, attempting to blink away some of his excessive tears.

With an irritated huff, his shishu said, “I said it’s *fine.* Come on.” His arms opened up.

Really? *Really?* Luo Binghe froze. He hadn’t even been shameless enough to ask for comfort from Ning Yingying. Yet here Liu Qingge, the stiff and indifferent peak lord, was offering a hug. “Why?” Luo Binghe couldn’t help but blurt, shocked.

Liu Qingge blushed and scowled. “You’re not alright.” As if *that* explained it. He dropped his arms. “Fine.”

“No!” Luo Binghe threw himself forward, and somehow found himself *afraid* to let this opportunity slip by. To his shock, the war god captured him in a gentle hold. He was stiff as a

statue. Where Shen Yuan was bony angles and soft limbs, Liu Qingge was lean and taut and *full of muscle.*

It took an entire minute for his shishu to lower his arms.

Five more minutes passed before he ran a single, uncertain hand over the back of Luo Binghe's head.

In just ten minutes, Luo Binghe was a complete puddle, soaking in comfort from a man he had never even thought about twice before. He did not want to move. *Greedy,* he silently admonished himself.

Liu Qingge never asked him to get up or move. Every now and then, a stilted hand would pat his head.

At one point, the war god sighed. His hand settled on Luo Binghe's back. "Shameless."

There was no real reprimand in that word.

That hand rubbed comforting circles into Luo Binghe. *Incorrigible*, he silently agreed. His heart was full of warmth, even as it was fractured and bleeding. He *wanted.* Oh, how he *yearned.*

His selfish, greedy heart had now decided that one impossible thing was not enough.

Now it needed two.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

3,700 words (ish), with a 18 minute reading time.

Thank you everyone for your support and comments!! Honestly, I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate it. I know I'm behind on comments, I will reply as soon as I can <3

CW: Chronic Illness things, negative thoughts, and medication.

By the time Shen Yuan was able to hang up on his sister, he had a pounding headache. He sank down in his desk chair, not unlike a shrimp with his legs folded, and let his aching head rest in his hands. Rubbing his face, he groaned. Despite nearly thirty minutes of arguing, his sister did not believe him when he told her that Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe were just *friends*. He spent the majority of that time rejecting his sister's insistence that she needed to meet them right this second. He barely managed to scrape away with a half-promise to meet at a cafe in a few days.

(If they were even here in a few days!)

He sank into his chair, and allowed himself five whole minutes to just sit in silence. There were things he purposely did not think about. Like talking to his sister again. Or the possibility of getting to see her. He crumpled up into a knot of a man and bit his own arm as a surge of emotions burst inside his chest.

Then he decided to be a grown up and get out of his chair. It was time to crawl back to his "boyfriends."

Ugh! Why does everyone keep thinking that?!

He's straight!

(Probably.)

As he reached the doorknob, he stilled at that startling thought. *Probably????? What???!*

It was too much to unpack.

Not now.

Not *ever.*

Besides, it did not matter!

Liu Qingge was most likely asexual and Luo Binghe had an entire harem waiting for his return!

(*AHHH!!* Why was he thinking about those two?!)

Setting his jaw, Shen Yuan tried to secure a modicum of self-control. Then he pushed the door open to a fever dream.

What? The? Fuck?

Luo Binghe lay on the couch with a blanket resting around his shoulders. His hair was a frizzy mess, probably due to how much it was pet. On the couch with him – *underneath him* – Liu Qingge sat. The War God of Bai Zhan, *the Great Master Liu,* was cuddling! *Cuddling!!* Well. Not so much cuddling as being a stand-in emotional support teddy bear. He was stiff as a dry piece of bamboo, hand awkwardly patting Luo Binghe's head. His disciple clung to the war god, as if he were the last standing tree in a windstorm.

The sight made Shen Yuan's heart constrict. Not in jealousy, but-

He wasn't sure *what.*

It made him happy and tingly and warm and it was fucking weird.

As Liu Qingge's eyes snapped to him, Shen Yuan instantly understood if he said *anything,* he would ruin whatever was happening between the two. So he decided to move on.

Yes! This is all perfectly normal!!

"Food has arrived," Shen Yuan said. "Sorry for the wait."

So normal!

Luo Binghe stirred. "This disciple can get it!"

"No, no," Shen Yuan said, throwing up his hands. "Stay there. I'll get it."

Despite his urging, both of them separated and his sticky disciple was happily trailing after him. To no one's surprise, Luo Binghe asked about his sister, which Shen Yuan answered reluctantly. He hoped to let the subject drop. Talking about his sister made his heart heavy in a way he couldn't necessarily define.

Before long, they had their meal set up on the dining room table with plates and napkins for all three of them.

Liu Qingge eyed the food suspiciously, while Luo Binghe marvelled at it.

“Here, Liu-shishu,” he said, cheerfully. He served up a healthy portion to his shishu.

Very normal.

“Here, Shizun!” He grabbed his plate.

“Ah, Binghe, wait,” Shen Yuan said with a wince. “I can’t eat that.” Two pairs of eyes slid to him, questioningly. With a sigh, he explained, “Some foods don’t work well with me. So I have to eat very boring things.” He smiled, and collected his portion of the ordered food. No gluten, no dairy, no spices, and so on and so forth.

“This Binghe will learn recipes for Shizun to have good food,” Luo Binghe said, determined.

Shen Yuan smiled. “The list of what I can’t eat is probably longer than the list of what I can. Don’t worry, Binghe. It’s fine.”

The doe-eyed look he received in turn made his heart pang.

With a reluctant sigh, he said, “…I’ll put together a list for you, and we can go out shopping for food tomorrow.” He paused, thinking. “That is, if we don’t return to PIDW. Ugh. You two will need a change of clothes. And toiletries.” He frowned. “Hopefully we will return soon.”

“PIDW?” Liu Qingge asked.

“Ah.” Shen Yuan’s face heated. He poked at his food. Of all the things that had happened within the last twenty-four hours, he really didn’t want to explain this. “Home,” he offered, and then hesitated. “The other world.” His posture shrank, and he frowned at his food. It was hardly palatable. Even compared to the normal shit that he got at Qing Jing Peak. It was crumbly, dry, and lacked any real flavor. (No, he was not spoiled by a certain protagonist’s cooking!) “There is no easy way to explain this,” he continued, ignoring the eyes that bore into him. He did *have* to explain. It was either now or later. If he got it over with now, he could hide in his room until the morning. Maybe they would be back in PIDW by then. “… the other world… exists here as a…” He winced. “The best way to say it, is that it exists as a book.*”*

“A book?” Luo Binghe asked, curiously. He was overly polite again, sitting properly with his thick lashes fanning his eyes.

“…yes,” Shen Yuan said.

“Is it a history book?” his disciple probed. Then he perked up. “Is Binghe your favorite character? Is that why there’s so many paintings of him?”

Shen Yuan felt his face scorch with embarrassment. “Ah-!” He cringed. “Well.”

Hand slamming onto the table, Liu Qingge stared at them. “*What.”*

“Mmhmm, Liu-shishu! There’s a lot of paintings, like that mug I gave you! Right in there!” His cheeky disciple pointed towards the room.

Shen Yuan stood abruptly. “*Binghe!* They are *nothing* like that cup!”

A curious expression set over his shidi, and he stood while eying the door.

“*No!”* Shen Yuan cried. “No one is allowed in that room!”

“But Shizun,” his disciple pouted. “Liu-shishu’s imagination might run a little wild…”

“Who is imagining?!” Liu Qingge snapped, his face turning red.

Righteous anger filled Shen Yuan, and he was *Shen Yuan,* Peerless Cucumber, who spent *thousands* of hours and a ridiculous amount of cash putting together a clean collection that did right by the characters! An extensive, well-rounded collection that was not focused on their dicks or boobs or anything else inappropriate! Shen Yuan hadn’t realized he started a rant until he took in a big gust of air and threw a fist down atop the table, “-it’s hardly better than that *hack* of an author. Try finding *any* merch where everyone has all their clothes! I am not even asking for something historically accurate! Just *please,* for the love of all that is good, *give Binghe a fucking shirt!* People are *so obsessed with your-!”*

Then he froze.

Oh.

Oh, *no.*

Shen Yuan dropped down into his chair.

That was *very* unlike Shen Qingqiu.

If he could choose a point in his life where his body finally gave out, he would choose right then and there. Well. Maybe about five minutes earlier, before he even started the rant. Fuck. *Fuck.* What would they think of him *now?* It was one thing being a coward and a liar. Now he was… this? Whatever *he* was?

Shen Qingqiu was coy and calm and always collected. He was elegant and graceful.

Flip that on its head, make it a bit scrawny and a bit ugly, and voila! There was Shen Yuan. And he was…

A basket case. A shut in. A burden. Someone who had given up living, and instead just read shitty online serials. And got *really* upset about said shitty online serials.

When compared to someone like *Shen Qingqiu,* he fell short in almost every single aspect.

He was just… Shen Yuan.

Head in his hands, he stared down into his lap. He wanted to melt into the floorboards. Maybe someone in the building would start a fire, and he could just disappear in the chaos of the evacuation. Maybe-

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe exclaimed. "That was *amazing!"*

Shen Yuan flinched and peeked up at his disciple through his fingers. There were stars in Luo Binghe's eyes, and a large smile on his face. He looked like he just witnessed the moon shapeshifting into a dragon.

On the other side of the table, Liu Qingge watched him with an open expression. His head was tilted ever so slightly, as if he was able to see a whole new spectrum of colors on Shen Yuan with the right angle.

"I…" Shen Yuan's voice broke. He cleared his throat and poked at his food. "It's… been a long day." He couldn't stop himself from tacking on, "Sorry."

His disciple slid from his spot to scoot closer to Shen Yuan. He paused as he reached out, uncertain. Then he stole one of Shen Yuan's hands, and held it dearly in both of his own. "Yuan-gege! Shizun!!" He grinned. "Why are you apologizing? This Binghe-" After a moment's hesitation, he said, "I really thought that was impressive."

Ah. Something about Luo Binghe using "I" made Shen Yuan's stomach swoop. He shrank. "Uh…"

"Speak your mind more often," Liu Qingge told him. "Now eat. Tell us about PIDW after."

That was that.

Huh.

Shen Yuan's face felt like a ceramic mask fresh from the kiln. *They're just being nice,* his brain supplied, helpfully. *They're just hiding their dislike.* He wanted this night to be over. Really, if he had the power to, he wanted to go back in time to Jin Lan City. If he had just stopped and listened*,* rather than just fucking assume, they would never be here to begin with. Ah! His face would never recover from this debacle, would it?

"Liu-shishu, try this!" Luo Binghe leaned over and dropped some food onto his plate, with his chin set on his hand. He kept sharp attention on his shishu's reaction. "What do you think?"

"Mn."

His disciple beamed.

Yep. This is perfectly normal.

"This one too, Liu-shishu!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Shen Yuan saw the war god flash him a meaningful glance. It surmised to: *What the fuck?*

This on you!! You deal with it!

Perplexed and only slightly suspicious, Liu Qingge humored the food-tasting. He kept flashing Shen Yuan looks, which he ignored.

What was he supposed to do?

There was no harm in… whatever this was!

Eventually, Luo Binghe started tailoring the food to things that his shishu obviously enjoyed, and started piling up his plate with them.

Liu Qingge looked down at the large pile of food with almost regret. Then he sighed, resigning himself to whatever this new development was, and ate.

The rest of the evening rolled on, and Shen Yuan kept waiting to be rescued back into the safety of PIDW. It did not happen. Instead, he was forced to sit in his favorite chair, with a big comfy blanket, and talk. He never thought once in his life that he would ever have to explain the Proud Immortal Demon Way to its *protagonist* and its canon fodder. It was awkward. So awkward that Shen Yuan turned his TV on at some point as an attempt at distraction.

It did not work.

Quiet music played in the background as Shen Yuan divulged the briefest of summaries of the book. He did not explain the acronym PIDW. He did not mention who the protagonist was. He did not say that it was almost *entirely* papapa.

There… really wasn't a lot he had the face to say, really.

Up until this point, Liu Qingge had stewed in a pensive silence. When he finally spoke, the room hushed. "Have things played out in our world as they did in the book?"

"A little of yes, a lot of no," Shen Yuan said, thoughtful. He phrased his next words with care. "Binghe came back sooner in our world than in the book."

"This Binghe was thrown into the Abyss there, too?" Luo Binghe asked. His smile was on without a single twitch. There was still pain there. It was difficult to detect, hidden underneath a polite gaze. But it was there.

Shen Yuan dropped his guilty eyes down into his lap. "Yes. The Abyss is where… Luo Binghe was supposed to become strong, and get a few key items to help him on his journey.

The System said it could not be skipped."

Neither of them answered, becoming quiet and reflective.

These two were a very dangerous pair. Both of them were too smart and too observant for *anything* to pass by. He was beginning to learn that his shidi often just let things slide, but he always internalized it.

Shen Yuan played with some fuzzes on his blanket and pressed his lips into a thin line. "How are you two taking this?"

"This Binghe…" Luo Binghe pondered, switching to a more informal speech, "I need more time." He danced between attempting informality with Shen Yuan, and being more respectful to his shishu.

"Mn," Liu Qingge nodded. He stared down into this mug of tea with a thoughtful frown.

Shen Yuan mirrored the nod. He ran his fingers through his hair, a luxury he hadn't been able to afford for years as Shen Qingqiu with the complexities of his hair styles. Breathing out through his nose, he flopped back in his seat and stared up at the ceiling.

"Shen Yuan," Liu Qingge waited for his attention. "The System."

"The System," Shen Yuan echoed.

"It is trying to influence the world to go the way the book did."

That… wasn't really a question. Shen Yuan was about to answer, and had to stop. To Liu Qingge, there was still a distinct difference between the *world* and the *book.* He stared at the man in front of him. For so long, he had thought of him as a character – well, worse than that. He was background canon fodder. When he thought of his shidi *now,* his mind no longer went there. He wasn't quite sure where Liu Qingge fell anymore.

"Yes," he answered, cautiously. "I suppose."

"Did you…" Liu Qingge frowned. "Did you have a hand in the demonic invasion of the Immortal Conference?"

Eyes widening, Shen Yuan balked. "No!"

A bit of tension eased from his shidi's shoulders, and he nodded.

No one spoke for a bit. The same thought occurred to them all: he hadn't had a *hand* in the Immortal Conference, but he certainly hadn't attempted to stop it. Shen Yuan stared down at his lap, his heart beginning to sink. All this time, he had looked at each and every single event as inevitable. Events that he would have to prepare for.

He never had considered they might be something he could impact or *change.*

Not once had he ever considered PIDW as a world that had already existed – that the System might twist it to match something some stupid hack author wrote.

It had always just been a *web novel.*

“Ling Xi Caves.”

Shen Yuan glanced up at his shidi. “You mean… the qi deviation?”

“The System…” Liu Qingge cut off, face pinched. “Is that how it happened in the book?”

“No,” Shen Yuan answered, confused. “No. In the book-” His throat dried and he wondered if he should even say any of this. After floundering in hesitation, he finally sighed. What was the point in lying? “In the book, you died.”

Expression relaxing, Liu Qingge probed, “The System didn’t tell you to save me?”

“Ah.” Shen Yuan shook his head, still slightly confused. “No, it didn’t.”

There was something almost soft in his shidi’s eyes. “It was you, then. Your choice.”

Heat settled over Shen Yuan’s face. It wasn’t as if it were entirely selfless! He shook his head, and he said, “I was irresponsible and wasn’t quite certain of what I was doing. I could have ruined your cultivation.”

“Or I could have died,” his shidi retorted with a raised eyebrow.

Shen Yuan winced.

“Did the System hurt Shizun for helping Liu-shishu?” Luo Binghe asked, pondering.

“Hm? Oh. No,” Shen Yuan said and shook his head. “It did not. It only seemed to care at first if I acted as Shen Qingqiu, at least until I unlocked OOC – er, out of character. It seems to only care about big plot points.”

“The Immortal Conference,” Liu Qingge pointed out.

“Yes. And I can’t tell anyone about the System itself or being a transmigrator.” Shen Yuan stopped himself from squirming, as tempting as it was with both of these men staring him down.

“Because of repercussions,” Liu Qingge added. “Death.”

“Not in all cases!” Shen Yuan said, lifting up his hands. “Sometimes it’s just a little pain. Other times it is just some point deductions.”

“Pain?*”* The war god was starting to look very angry again. “*Points?”*

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe interrupted. “What happens if your deductions go to zero?”

“...”

Liu Qingge's mood soured.

"How does Shizun *earn* points?" Luo Binghe asked.

Shen Yuan opened his mouth to answer, and his face colored. "I don't think it's necessary to get into that." He waved a hand through the air. "None of this matters. I…" He stared down at his lap, guilt prickling his insides. "I have done what I can with the System, but it isn't enough."

"Shizun." His disciple swept a hand out to gesture all around them. "It is."

Shen Yuan shook his head. *I could have done more. I should have.*

Reading the look on his face, Luo Binghe continued, "Shizun said the System forced him to act like the other Shen Qingqiu. That Shen Qingqiu was cruel to this Binghe. Even when the System was telling Shizun what he could and could not do, he was kind to this disciple. He *saved* this disciple. Many times! Shizun even got gravely injured-"

"Bah," Shen Yuan said, throwing his hand in the air to wipe away that memory. As if he wanted to be praised for that again! It was such a stupid move, and crippled his cultivation. *Fuck you, Without a Cure!* "This m-…" He wasn't really a peak lord or cultivation master, was he? "This one was simply doing what is expected of a master."

"Shizun, it *wasn't* expected*!"* Luo Binghe exclaimed. "You threw yourself in front of this disciple! The System tried to tell you what to do-"

"Binghe*,"* Shen Yuan snapped. "I *listened.* I…" His voice wavered and he took in a slow breath to garner some control over his voice. "I didn't try hard enough. I threw you away. I was a coward." He stopped himself from saying he wasn't Luo Binghe's real master, because last time that did not go over well. "We're done talking about this." He threw the blanket off his lap, and eased up on to his feet. Fuck. His body *hurt.* "We should get ready for bed. I don't have…" His voice trailed off.

Both the protagonist and the war god had exchanged a look when they thought he wasn't paying them attention. A *look!!*

"What?" Shen Yuan narrowed his eyes.

"What don't you have, Shizun?" Luo Binghe asked, sweetly.

What?

The.

Fuck!!

Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe weren't supposed to get in league with each other!! Not against *Shen Yuan!!*

“You’re too small,” Liu Qingge said, obviously trying to distract Shen Yuan from their quiet scheming. He was trying to say that the two of them could not fit into Shen Yuan’s clothes.

Because he had no self-restraint, *apparently,* Shen Yuan murmured to himself, “You can’t just say that to a man, aiyah…”

Apparently he hadn’t spoken quietly enough, because his disciple’s eyebrows jumped in shock and his shidi blushed.

“Your clothes will not fit,” Liu Qingge hastily explained.

It was far too easy to rile his shidi. “I think my clothes fit me fine, thank you.”

“Shen. Yuan.” Liu Qingge threw him an aggrieved, almost bullied look.

He tried to bite back his smirk. He failed.

“Yuan-gege,” his disciple said, cheerfully, “the clothes you’re wearing now aren’t *all* yours.”

“Oh,” Shen Yuan looked at his shirt. He fiddled with the collar, attempting to adjust it. It had slid off to the side, showing off a big section of his shoulder. *Scandalous!* “You’re right. Thank you, I completely forgot. I’m sorry.”

“It looks good on Yuan-gege,” Luo Binghe said, with a slight pink on his cheeks. He exchanged *another* look with his shishu.

To this one, Liu Qingge’s eyes widened. Then his face went bright red.

“Since you two are *so* well acquainted,” Shen Yuan said, dryly. He had no idea what that exchange was for, either. “You two can sleep out here.” Not that there ever had been any other option, really. There’s only one bed? Ha! Not today, Satan. He began moving furniture around the room, which meant both of his guests sprung up and instantly took over.

Halfway through, with Shen Yuan leaning on his cane, he hit his forehead with the palm of his hand. “Fuck!”

Luo Binghe jumped.

Blushing, Shen Yuan held up a hand. “No! Not you. Sorry. I forgot to take my meds.” He waved his hands at the two of them, and quickly escaped the room. Frowning, he took stock of the many bottles in his medicine cabinet. Normally, he took his evening meds before eating to help with the nausea. He sighed.

It’s been far too long since he had to worry about medicine. That was partially why he had all the pain, and why he was feeling weaker and dizzier. Ugh. He took the medication dry, and went to go see what he could do for his surprise guests.

Staying in his living room would *not* be a good long term solution.

Fuck.

He better not *need* a long term solution.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Roughly 5,100 words (longest chapter yet!), which is about 22 ish minutes of reading.

CW: There is puking, described only in sounds not in detail. And talk of medication.

Liu Qingge stared out at a vast darkened landscape, with geometric silhouettes cutting up the horizon. Twinkles of light winked in the depths of the night sky, floating like false stars. Unfamiliar sounds echoed all around, even long after the sun had set. The city never seemed to sleep. Strange blocks crawled along flattened roads, people continued to scramble along walkways, and distant unnatural cries haunted the night. When he craned his head up to peer at the stars, the sky was empty. It was terribly lonely. His eyes fell shut. He wasn't quite sure what to make of all of this – of Shen Yuan, of the alien world, or even of the fact that he *might* be just a character in a book.

A character that was supposed to die.

With a slight sigh, he sank against the railing and set his head on his chin. Even if this world was strange, he had to admit it was somewhat beautiful. The same way monsters could be beautiful: every abhorrent limb and twist of their body was perfectly manufactured for violence and survival.

Footsteps drew up behind him. There wasn't any need to be cautious, but his spine straightened and he shifted ever so slightly to catch sight of whoever joined him. Decades of training, even without his cultivation, did not go away in the span of a few hours.

"Yuan-gege mentioned not too much time passed here when we were back in our world," Luo Binghe said. He pretended not to notice Liu Qingge's guarded behavior, and leaned against the railing beside him. "Hours passed in our world, and here only enough time passed for the blood on Yuan-gege to dry." He glanced over at Liu Qingge. "But when we were *here,* time moved differently. A night passed in our world, when only a few hours passed here."

Liu Qingge let the observations sink in, and he nodded.

Setting his chin on his hand, Luo Binghe looked up at him through his lashes. It was almost coy. "What is Liu-shishu thinking?"

That I am not quite sure what game you're playing, Liu Qingge thought as he narrowed his eyes. Throughout his life, he has had more than a few unwanted advances from other people. He was not blind to the way Luo Binghe watched him. That didn't make it any less shocking.

For as long as Liu Qingge could remember, the disciple had only ever had eyes for one person. Even just that day, Luo Binghe had unabashedly made eyes at his own shizun. Why was he turning that face to Liu Qingge too!?

Instead of voicing any of that, he only commented, “We need more information.”

“We’re going to kill it, right?” Luo Binghe asked. He didn’t have to say what *it* was, both of them were on the same page: they needed to figure out how to get rid of the System and save Shen Yuan. That was no question.

The fact that Luo Binghe *included* Liu Qingge… well. It made his chest a little tight.

“Mn.”

A long silence passed between the two of them, with Liu Qingge staring off into the city. He felt a pair of eyes slowly taking scope of him, trailing down the side of his face and down his legs. It was hard to lose himself in his thoughts when he felt those eyes like teasing fingers on his skin. He managed another minute before he drew his eyes back to the man beside him.

“What.”

The corner of Luo Binghe’s lip plucked upwards in delight. “This one likes seeing Liu-shishu like this.” Heat rushed to Liu Qingge’s cheeks and he straightened, ready to snap. Quickly, Luo Binghe clarified, “Not as… the War God of Bai Zhan, but…” His posture was relaxed in a melted kind of way. He motioned in front of him, to let that fill in his meaning.

Lips pulling into a thin line, Liu Qingge grunted. He understood. Here he wasn’t necessarily a “peak lord.” He was just himself. With a shrug, he said, “You too.” A lot of Luo Binghe had changed over the years; most of what Liu Qingge had ever thought of the boy was… well. Not much at all. Now, standing next to him, he realized that there was so much that he didn’t know.

What surprised him more was that he *wanted* to know.

“Mn…” Luo Binghe watched him, seemingly content just to study his face as if it were a masterpiece of calligraphy.

Liu Qingge wasn’t one to start a conversation, or really carry one out. He sighed out through his nose, feeling his skin prickle with discomfort. He felt off kilter in situations like this; when he had to interact with people he didn’t really know.

“Can this one be so bold to learn more about Liu-shishu…?” Luo Binghe asked.

“You can ask.” That did not mean he would answer.

Luo Binghe nodded, and he turned to look out at the twinkling lights. He considered his next words, letting the sounds of the city waft around them. “Liu-shishu really likes fighting. What do you like about it?”

He wasn't wrong, if only understating it. Liu Qingge considered the question; it was easier without eyes on him. He braced both hands against the railing, and missed the familiar weight of Cheng Luan. He gathered some words together. "The rules make sense." That made it fun. His lips pulled into a small line, and after some deliberation he added, "People don't."

"Mn." Luo Binghe nodded. He watched a couple hop out of one of the many moving boxes on the ground and didn't press for more.

Liu Qingge would have left it there. Except that for some reason, he didn't want to. With Luo Binghe focused elsewhere, it was easier for the thoughts to line themselves up. There was no expectation for him to perform a certain way, just an open invitation. It was comforting and encouraging. The words volunteered themselves. "The world never made sense," he said, and out of the corner of his eye he watched the other man smother a startled look. "Not as a kid. Not even now, really. I was a headache to my mother." His father never really cared one way or another. But he wasn't the one that had to deal with navigating the lethal politics of being one of many wives. "Private tutors did not last long. I didn't learn the way they wanted me to." He frowned. "And then one day someone put a sword in my hands."

It was wooden and a little too big for him at the time. He could practically feel the worn grain against his fingertips.

"And the world made sense. For once." Liu Qingge sighed and shifted on his feet. "Everything else fell into place after that." It was more than that – more than what he would ever get into. There was a point in his life where he was so weak and helpless, he nearly lost everything. He had promised himself that he would never be that weak again.

"And becoming Peak Lord?" Luo Binghe asked.

Liu Qingge shrugged. "It was the next step."

It had been a goal, something to fight for. Build his cultivation, learn, fight, and get better.

"What's the next step now?" Luo Binghe asked.

Frowning, Liu Qingge tapped his fingers on the railing. "Ascension?"

Luo Binghe laughed, eyes dancing. It wasn't unkind. "That sounds like a question. Liu-shishu, what about what you *want?"*

There were rules for wanting – rules he didn't really understand. So it was safer to ignore that part of himself, and push it away. Wanting was terrifying. It made him vulnerable and weak. He could not *want.* Mouth dry, Liu Qingge shook his head.

"Do you like being Peak Lord?" Luo Binghe asked, quickly switching to a new line of questioning.

Liu Qingge never considered that. He liked being strong. He liked being good. He liked having goals and tasks that he could accomplish, with little to no ambiguity. But he did not like other things. The politics. The people. The mess of disciples.

(If he were honest, he would admit that he liked them. They grew on him, the way someone might start appreciating the way a landslide changed the course of a river.)

For years now, his loyalty to the sect and his position had been *him.* It had been everything. He was *good* at being the War God of Bai Zhan. People depended on him to be that. He wasn't quite sure who he was without it. But did he *like* it?

Liu Qingge stared down at his hands. "It's who I am."

"No," Luo Binghe spoke very softly, "Liu-shishu is more than just that. He is very capable. He is an excellent fighter. But he is also someone who knows how to dissect the world and see the hidden parts within it. The *way* he sees the world is very beautiful. He takes in everything, but only chooses to comment on some things. Ultimately, he tries to uphold justice and do what is right, not because anyone tells him to, but because he chooses to." His eyes held soft admiration. "He is loyal. He is kind to those that he chooses. He is a good person."

Cheeks heating, Liu Qingge turned away. He wasn't sure how to respond to that. A part of him wanted to deny it, and tell him that he was wrong. He couldn't bring himself to lie.

As if he knew not to push any further, Luo Binghe switched topics. "What are Liu-shishu's thoughts on Shizun?"

That question did not help with the flustered warmth of his face. He tried to not immediately give in to violence. It was easier to hide behind the certainty of his strength. Instead, he glowered at the city. "What sort of question is that?"

Still smiling, Luo Binghe leaned closer. His shoulder brushed close to Liu Qingge's arm. He fluttered his lashes. "He's different."

"Shen Yuan is Shen Yuan." Liu Qingge did not move away. He was tense, but he did not move.

"What about when Yuan-gege is Shizun?" Luo Binghe asked.

That question draped over Liu Qingge and slowly sunk in. He turned to look over his shoulder, back into the darkened sitting area. Some time had passed since Shen Yuan had disappeared into his room. That left just the two of them. It was different seeing this new side of his shixiong. The man was nothing like Liu Qingge had initially thought. And it wasn't a bad thing. It was breaking a rock open and seeing all the varying crystals hidden inside. "It's always been him."

Grinning, Luo Binghe bumped their arms together. "This Binghe agrees! He is eager to learn more about him, too!"

With a heavy blush, Liu Qingge was certain he responded to that. He wasn't quite sure what he said. Luo Binghe was too close, and it was making his chest tight in a way that usually only *Shen Yuan* caused, and now it was too much. He stormed back inside and mentioned something about going to sleep. There were two places set up on the floor: each with their

own pillow and a mass collection of blankets. Shen Yuan had *many* comforts in this world; plush chairs, thick blankets, over-stuffed pillows, and so on and so forth. It really was a wonder how he adapted so well to life in the other world.

Stiff, Liu Qingge chose a bed and laid down to wait until he passed out.

There was a slight issue: the pants he was wearing were not meant for sleeping. He had only worn them for a few hours, and he was *very* done wearing them. Not that he would ever even dare such impropriety as taking them off.

By the time Luo Binghe closed the door to the balcony and settled into his sleeping spot on the floor, Liu Qingge briefly felt like breaking everything.

The pants were too tight.

He was *never* going to fall asleep.

Every little noise grated. Some device quietly hummed somewhere in the kitchen. There was another slight ticking somewhere else. Annoying. Liu Qingge grit his teeth. He had slept in worse conditions than this. Here, he was practically spoiled with comfort.

Time crawled.

He gave up even attempting to sleep, and tried meditating.

It worked for the better part of an hour.

"...Liu-shishu?"

Liu Qingge withheld a sigh.

"...how offended would you be if this Binghe took off his pants?"

A choked sound threatened to slip from his lips. Liu Qingge twisted on the floor so his back was to the other man, ignoring the way his skin flared with embarrassment. "Why are you asking?"

"Liu-shishu can't sleep either, and this one thinks it may be because of… similar discomforts," Luo Binghe spoke in a low, rough whisper.

He needed to stop speaking because that voice hit somewhere in Liu Qingge that he was *very* apt at ignoring. Until now. "Whatever."

"...so Liu-shishu will not be uncomfortable?"

"Luo. Binghe!" Liu Qingge snapped into a sitting position and shot him a glare. "Shut. Up. Do what you wish. Now sleep." He flopped back down and barely resisted the urge to hide under the blankets.

"Thank you, Liu-shishu!" the other man whispered.

There was the *very* awkward noise of a zipper. Then shuffling fabric.

Liu Qingge's heart relocated in his ears. His hands knotted around his blankets. The last time his face was this warm, it was back in that cave full of succubis, and it *wasn't* the naked demons setting him off.

With a happy and relieved sigh, Luo Binghe murmured, "Good night, Liu-shishu."

His heartbeat pounded in his fingertips. Liu Qingge did not answer, not trusting his voice. He wasn't even sure what he would say. There was nothing *to* say. He went back to meditation.

The pants were *really* uncomfortable.

Two hours after they were supposed to go to bed, Liu Qingge was considering all manner of destruction. He worked his way through all the items in the sitting area, and rated them on two different categories: how difficult it would be to break them, and how satisfying it would be to do so. Despite Luo Binghe's drawn out breaths, he doubted the man was actually asleep. Between Liu Qingge's fidgeting, his half restrained sighs, and flipping back and forth, he would be surprised if anyone else could sleep at all.

At one point he gave up and sat up to meditate.

After about twenty minutes of that he considered arson. Then he decided it would not be anywhere near as satisfying as breaking things with his hands.

Liu Qingge ran his fingers through his hair, attempting to alleviate some of the tension in his shoulders.

That's when he heard a thump in Shen Yuan's room.

He stilled.

Moments later, the door to the bedroom slammed open and Shen Yuan burst out of his room. He tripped over his own feet, and caught himself by slamming into the far wall.

Liu Qingge was on his feet in seconds, and he was not at all surprised to find Luo Binghe standing beside him.

(Don't. Look. Down!)

With a small noise, Shen Yuan tore into the bathroom. The lid of the toilet seat hit with a sharp *clang,* and then the sound of him retching filled the silence of the apartment.

"Water," Liu Qingge told Luo Binghe. He walked after Shen Yuan, following him into the bathroom. His finger brushed the light switch, and he tugged a towel from one of the many

drawers. After he ran it under some water, he slid into an (uncomfortable) crouch beside Shen Yuan. Out of habit, he reached out and placed his hand on his back.

Then he remembered that they had no cultivation.

Shen Yuan gasped, the entirety of his body shaking, “Ugh, ew…” His skin was pale and thin. The circles under his eyes were more pronounced. He looked miserable. “Qingge,” he groaned, without looking up. “I… am fine. Just…”

Whatever else he was going to say was interrupted by another round sickness.

Qingge.

Shen Yuan… He knew who was next to him without even *looking.* He had said *Qingge.*

Just like how he only says Luo Binghe’s name.

Qingge, Qingge, Qingge…

“Only one bathroom. J-Just… close the door. Leave me. I’m sorry.”

Liu Qingge snapped back to the present. He rubbed a circle between Shen Yuan’s shoulder blades. He still wore Luo Binghe’s shirt. Except-

No pants.

Why?!

Is everyone-

“Liu-shishu?”

At the doorway and very pantsless, Luo Binghe held a cup of water. He watched Shen Yuan with terrified worry.

“I’m… fine!” Shen Yuan said, as he gagged into the toilet. It was very convincing.

“Blanket.” Liu Qingge jerked his chin to his shixiong. “Tea. Any to settle a stomach.”

“Yes, Liu-shishu!” Luo Binghe said. He placed the water and he left the doorway.

“I’m sorry…” Shen Yuan murmured, sinking down as much as he could with his head in the bowl.

“Stop apologizing.”

It had been something Liu Qingge had noticed — the more Shen Yuan was himself, and the more he let his walls come down, the more he apologized. As if he were apologizing for his existence. Liu Qingge hated it.

Masquerading as the Qing Jing Peak Lord, Shen Yuan was confident and coy. He still had a difficult time allowing others to care for him, even in the case of Without a Cure, but he never *apologized* just for existing.

Liu Qingge had moved from back rubs to threading his fingers through silky, short hair. He froze for only half a heart beat. *Fuck.* He blamed Luo Binghe and his fucking head pats. Then he blamed his stupid mortal body. It needed far more sleep than he was used to! If he hadn't been exhausted, or if he hadn't awkwardly tried comforting Luo Binghe earlier-

On the ground, Shen Yuan shifted. It was a small thing, but it made his body press against Liu Qingge. He was so small and shaking all over.

The two of them did not speak.

Warmth swelled in Liu Qingge's chest. He wanted to kiss this man. (Not right now, obviously, but…) It was a *need.* As much as he needed to take a breath of air, or eat, or sleep – the *need* to kiss Shen Yuan was powerful and strong and…

Very, very wrong.

It was disrespectful.

It was…

Shen Yuan murmured something about it being over, and he closed off the toilet and flushed it. He was still trembling. Confusion filled his eyes as he blinked owlishly at the damp towel offered to him. His hands shook too much to even properly hold it.

Fighting a smile, Liu Qingge cleaned his face for the second time that day.

I want to kiss you.

Luo Binghe came back with the blanket just in time to help Shen Yuan wash out his mouth. Soon his shixiong was wrapped up in a blanket, murmuring exhausted apologies.

When he slipped and got far too close to hitting his head on the corner of the cabinet, Liu Qingge lifted him up in his arms. There was barely even a mumble of protest. His shixiong's head rolled, and his hair tickled Liu Qingge's neck.

The blanket was wrapped around Shen Yuan's shoulders, but not… all of him.

So one of Liu Qingge's hands slid across the smooth, bare skin of his legs.

The warmth from earlier turned into a loud burn that smoldered in the pit of his stomach. *Don't. Look.* Liu Qingge scorned himself. *Be. Respectful.*

When he turned, he caught Luo Binghe's expression. There was a powerful passion in his eyes as his gaze slid up the length of his shizun's leg and settled on Liu Qingge's hand.

Disrespectful, Liu Qingge almost croaked. He could not be so hypocritical. Instead, he cleared his throat and moved past. He focused on the steps it took to get to the bedroom, and not on how his shixiong's breath teased his skin.

Now his pants were too tight for an entirely different reason.

He laid the smaller man down on his bed, and tucked him in. "Can you drink tea?"

"Stay," Shen Yuan told him, catching his wrist.

Liu Qingge's heart pounded. Each beat resounded in every single fiber of his being. The tips of his fingers numbed.

"The bed is big enough," Shen Yuan said, blinking. "Just stay. Binghe can, too."

The bed *was* rather large. All three of them would be able to lay in it without so much as touching. Why did a single man have so much space for himself? It just made Shen Yuan look even lonelier.

Wakefulness seemed to thread into Shen Yuan, and he blushed. "I… don't want to wake you guys if I get sick again. You won't have to listen to me hurling if you're in here."

Following that line of thought, if they shared a bed Liu Qingge could wake if his shixiong got sick again and *help* him to the bathroom. It diminished the possibility of him falling and hurting himself in his haste.

"Besides, neither of you seemed comfortable. ...had you slept at all? You seem tired. I'm sorry. The bed is better. It's really nice, actually. Though, you might think it's too soft. I-If…" Shen Yuan swallowed. "If you're not comfortable…"

"Shut up. Can you drink tea?" Liu Qingge demanded, his skin reddening.

"Mn."

Luo Binghe delivered the tea, and both of them piled up pillows so Shen Yuan could sit up. With the warm cup in his hands, he still seemed half asleep. His hair was an adorable, frizzy mess atop his head.

I want to kiss you.

"Yuan-gege?" his disciple asked.

Shen Yuan took a sip of tea, and made a curious sound.

"Can I look through your closet?" Luo Binghe asked. "For some pants. I know we said your clothes won't fit, but maybe there's something?"

Eyes dropping, Shen Yuan started to answer. Then his eyes widened and he started choking. He waved both of them off as both they jerked towards him. "Fine! Fine! Go. Go. I'm *fine!"* His face and neck were entirely red.

Don't. Look-

Luo Binghe had strong legs. That much was to be expected. Most cultivators had strong legs. There was nothing *special* about those legs. The defined muscle of his calves and the sharp lines up his thighs – none of that was new or interesting. Definitely not. And the shorts. It was just a short and small version of pants. Not special. Especially not with the way that the thin fabric *clung.* There was no mistaking what it clung *to.* Liu Qingge's mouth dried. Heat scorched through him. He barely stopped himself from making some sort of noise.

To his utter horror, he lifted his eyes and found Luo Binghe watching him.

The tiniest of smirk's quirked the other man's lips. Satisfied, he turned and disappeared into the closet.

Don't-

Liu Qingge tore his gaze away too late. The image of Luo Binghe's retreating ass played over and over in his head. He fought to retain any semblance of calm and control.

On the bed, Shen Yuan was having his own crisis. He murmured very quietly, "Heavenly pillar…"

If Liu Qingge admitted he heard that, he possibly might qi deviate. Even if he did not currently have any cultivation, his body would figure out how.

There was a long, drawn out silence as Luo Binghe searched the closet.

Liu Qingge did not know what to say. He wanted the awkward, stifling air to release. Unfortunately for everyone, he had no conversational eloquence to do so. So he suffered, quietly embarrassed.

A while passed before Shen Yuan broke the silence, staring into his cup. "It was my medication." He winced, guilt tucking his shoulders up towards his ears. "It's hard getting used to all of this again. I was supposed to take it before dinner. It's powerful stuff."

Frowning, Liu Qingge finally met his eyes.

"I didn't mean to wake you guys, or cause-"

He glared at him. "If you're going to apologize, don't."

"But I-"

"No."

The expression on Shen Yuan's face shifted from guarded guilt to an almost frustrated smile. "No?"

I. Want.

“No.” Liu Qingge confirmed. “Done?”

“That’s it?” his shixiong asked. “Just ‘no,’ and we’re moving on?”

“Yes?” Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, I get a ‘yes’ now?” Shen Yuan had a real smile now, and seemed more awake.

To. Kiss. You.

“What else needs to be said?” Liu Qingge asked, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

“You can’t just say ‘no’ and have the conversation be over,” Shen Yuan retorted.

Liu Qingge raised another eyebrow, and crossed his arms. He absolutely could, and he would. Case in point.

As the silence drew out, Shen Yuan lifted a hand to cover his laugh. He looked up at Liu Qingge, eyes glittering like stars.

Liu Qingge could not breathe.

They stared at another for a second too long.

As if he were shy, Shen Yuan dropped his eyes.

“You want a conversation, Shen Yuan?” Liu Qingge grabbed his wrist, pulling it away from his mouth, and leaned in. They were close now. He stared the other man dead in the eye. “You are not unwanted.” For a moment, he let those words sink in. Shen Yuan’s eyes widened. “You do not need to hide yourself. Your illness isn’t everything you are. Who you are, *all* that you are, is all that you *need* to be. So stop. Apologizing.”

The smile dropped from Shen Yuan’s face and he stared at Liu Qingge, aghast. He started blinking very rapidly with the shine in his eyes growing. His jaw set. He swallowed. “You… you can’t just say things like that.”

“Why?”

“B-Because…” Shen Yuan swallowed, again.

And for a second his eyes dropped to Liu Qingge’s lips.

The inferno that followed nearly overtook Liu Qingge. His body *screamed* to close the distance between them. He *ached.* His mouth tingled with expectation.

Shen Yuan licked his lips.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement. He dropped Shen Yuan’s wrist, and pulled back. The flutter of his shixiong’s heartbeat left an echo on his fingertips. He cleared his

throat. To underline what he said before, he threw Shen Yuan a scathing look. “Stop apologizing.” Then he acknowledged Luo Binghe, who stood by the door.

The disciple had that look in his eyes again. Hunger. His eyes danced between the two of them, dark and wanting. Then it cleared. He smiled and stepped across the room, offering a piece of folded fabric to Liu Qingge. “I found something, Liu-shishu! They’re still a little small, but they’re comfier than what we were wearing. See?”

Oh.

The pants Luo Binghe wore were *not* any better than before.

It was almost worse.

The fabric was thin, and clung to his skin. Every single swell, curve, and line was well defined in the low light of the bedroom.

A quiet, strangled sound escaped Shen Yuan.

Luo Binghe, hiding a satisfied smile, pushed the fabric into Liu Qingge’s hands.

Changing into these would be worse than just taking off his current pants… right?

His fingers twitched.

Would they look at him the same way… if he wore it?

The thought made his skin turn to cinder. He stiffened.

Luo Binghe moved on. As he passed, their shoulders brushed and fingers trailed across his hip. It was sly enough to easily be excused as an accident.

It wasn’t.

Soft voices sounded behind Liu Qingge as he stared down at the pants in his hands, indecision warring within him. Hours ago, he was abhorred and uncomfortable by the clothes he was stuffed into. Now he was considering something highly inappropriate. It should be outrageous.

Liu Qingge made a decision.

He left the room, and stepped into the bathroom.

In a few short moments, the uncomfortable pants were on the counter and he wore a tight but stretchy material. It was soft and light, and he sighed in relief to have them on. His stomach flipped as he reached for the doorknob. Then he ignored it.

At least he wore pants. Right?

He would ignore the offer to share the bed, and sleep out in the living room. Then he would rise before the others, and change back. There was no need-

As he turned out of the bathroom, Luo Binghe was right there. The man took half a step back to prevent them from running into another. “Liu-shishu,” he said, eyelashes fluttering over his cheeks, “This one moved your things to the bedroom. You have the middle.”

Liu Qingge’s throat tightened. He froze.

There was a heady look in Luo Binghe’s eyes. His eyes slid down Liu Qingge, for a second, before glancing back up. He searched his expression, as if asking for permission. Whatever he saw made his lips curl in pleasure, and he dragged his eyes down Liu Qingge’s body.

It was highly inappropriate.

It was disrespectful.

It was *shameless.*

Liu Qingge felt his breath catch.

“This Binghe is glad that his shishu is comfortable,” Luo Binghe purred in a low, sultry tone.

Tingles ran up Liu Qingge’s arms. He opened his mouth to retort, and found that his voice had decided to stop working.

Luo Binghe finally looked back up. The heat of his expression softened. “This Binghe will let his shishu get comfy in bed, first.”

With a jerky nod, Liu Qingge stepped past him.

This time, Luo Binghe caught Liu Qingge’s hip. He stared into his eyes, turning him ever so slightly so that their faces were close. “Liu-shishu.”

“What?” Liu Qingge tried snapping, but his voice came out too airy.

“This Binghe might not sleep well,” he murmured, a playful air curling his words. Behind his light and teasing smile, there was something heavy and ugly. Pain. “Liu-shishu should not try to touch him if… this Binghe has a troubling dream.”

The heat sapped away, and Liu Qingge nodded. He searched Luo Binghe’s eyes, until the man turned his face away. There was something there. “Is there something else I can do?”

Luo Binghe didn’t turn to look at him, even as his lips filled with a fake smile. “Liu-shishu is too generous to this Binghe… do not worry. Just leave this one be. Hopefully he does not disturb your sleep.”

Frowning, Liu Qingge stalled. That must be the reason why the sticky disciple didn’t jump at the chance to sleep next to his shizun. If he were afraid of acting out from nightmares, then

there’s the likelihood he would really hurt Shen Yuan. Uncertain of what to do, Liu Qingge reached up and patted Luo Binghe’s head. Then he turned and escaped into the room.

To the bed that he was going to share.

With Shen Yuan.

(And Luo Binghe.)

How did he get to this point?

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

3.5k words, with a 15 minute reading time (ish).

Luo Binghe again, so... expect the usual

CW: Low self-esteem, negative thoughts, and nightmares.

Sharing a bed with his shizun and shishu should have been a dream. Back in his own world it would have been. Here, though, Luo Binghe worried. He did not have control over the dream realm. That meant that all the nightmares he had trained to hide away had full control here.

As Liu Qingge methodically slipped into the bed, Luo Binghe watched with quiet fear curling underneath one of his lungs. His fingers twitched with unease. He could only distract himself so much by the pants his shishu wore or even by the fact that his one shizun didn't wear any. He wondered if his shizun thought of that fact as a handsome man slid into bed next to him. Neither looked at each other, playing some silent game of flustered ignorance.

Shen Yuan finished his tea and stared into the empty cup. Sleepiness overtook him all at once, and in moments Luo Binghe was at his side. He relieved the mug from his shizun's weak grip, and rearranged the pillows so he could glide back down into a more comfortable position. His eyes were heavy lidded as he searched Luo Binghe's face. A wrinkle formed between his eyebrows, and he asked, "Will Binghe be okay?"

Startled, Luo Binghe smiled reflexively at his shizun. It was too bright and forced. The Qing Jing Peak Lord could both be so masterfully observant and completely oblivious all at once. Somehow he always managed to notice the wrong things, and worse, interpret them incorrectly.

Just as he misinterpreted now. "I thought you and your shishu were…" Shen Yuan's question was eaten up by a yawn. One of his hands slid up and trailed over the side of Luo Binghe's head. Fingers tangled in his hair. "I thought you were getting along."

"We are, Shizun," Luo Binghe said, voice low. His heart was somewhere underneath his tongue. The simple gesture of affection had his knees weak, and he was seconds away from collapsing next to the bed and burying his head in his shizun's chest. "This disciple is not worried about sleeping next to his shishu." It was so hard to cut the habit of being respectful

to his shizun. For *years* he had always thought that he had finally done something right, that he had proven himself and somehow managed to earn the affection of his scornful master.

Now, it was hard to wrap his brain around the fact that he hadn't *earned* it.

Shen Yuan had just… given it to him.

The realization left him floating in a pool of uncertainty. Everything he thought he knew he needed to reconsider. Even thinking as far back as the early days, when Shen Yuan was locked in what he could or couldn't say. The man had still accepted punishment in order to treat Luo Binghe with kindness.

It made his heart a mess.

The hand on the side of his head dropped. Shen Yuan looked moments away from drifting away. “This… master is here,” he murmured. “He is here for… his Binghe…” Whatever else he tried to say, it disappeared as sleep finally won.

Luo Binghe watched him. He reached out a hand, wanting to push some of his shizun’s hair away from his face. His hand stilled. How could he ever dare? As lowly and as dirty as he was? His fingers curled. Then he startled when he realized another pair of eyes watched him.

In the low light, Liu Qingge’s expression was hard to discern. He did not comment on his actions. “Sleep.” It was both a demand and an invitation.

With a nod, Luo Binghe left his shizun's side. As much as it pained him to leave a dirtied dish, he set the tea cup aside. Then he wandered around the bed, using a hand to help trace his steps along the foot of it. These new eyes of his did not see well in the dark. In fact, they hardly saw at all. Even with the low light at his shizun's beside, everything was more blobs and blurry edges than sharp lines. He made it to his side of the bed, slid underneath his covers, and stared up at the ceiling.

He silently resolved not to sleep. That would be best. He would close his eyes and meditate throughout the evening until morning came.

He failed.

He wasn’t sure how far he made it through the night before he woke up in a cold sweat, fighting to breathe.

Terror blinded him. His mind was a mess of memory and dreams. There was a creature hot on his heels ready to sink its teeth in the soft flesh of his stomach. It had already gotten his heel,

and he was limping. His blood left a trail. He needed to stop the bleeding, and he needed to get away, but he couldn't, he-

"Luo Binghe, you're safe."

A terrible song filled the air. Its notes were cackles and eerie howls – the sound of beasts on a hunt. He only knew their names and weaknesses because of his shizun. (His shizun who threw him down here. Because he was unwanted. Because he was a beast. Because he was a demon.) It was one thing to learn about a creature from a book, and another to be faced with twenty of them. They toyed with him, tearing small chunks off the back of his calves and chasing him down unknown paths. Panic ate all sense and he hadn't realized that they were herding him straight to a dead end.

He was thirsty and hungry and alone and-

"Binghe. Deep breaths. One.. two… three…"

He was dirty. He was unwanted. Was there any *real* reason to fight? His shizun had said that demons could be good or bad, but he threw Luo Binghe away. That meant he was bad, didn't it? That meant that *he* didn't *deserve* to live. If his shizun-

Arms wrapped around him.

Luo Binghe choked on a scream, and tore his fingers into the flesh of the beast that-

"*Fuck! Binghe. You're safe. Breathe. You're safe."*

His vision cleared.

It was Liu Qingge.

One of his hands braced the back of Luo Binghe's head, and the other secured the small of his back. He kept repeating calming instructions in his ear, guiding him back to the waking world.

"Breathe," Liu Qingge whispered. "You're safe. You're home."

Tears spilled into Luo Binghe's eyes. He clutched on to his shishu. It was tight and greedy. All of his strength poured into that single hold. It wrenched him out of the horrors of his memories, as if he had been plucked from the icy depths of a frozen lake. He gasped and tried to catch his breath.

Liu Qingge did not complain. He continued to murmur into Luo Binghe's ear, not once hushing him or telling him to stop crying. They were promises of safety. Promises of being loved. *Why* would Liu Qingge say such things? He was a brute. He was cold and distant. The only thing he ever cared for was fighting.

(Didn't he have a sister?)

As quietly as he could, to not wake his shizun, Luo Binghe broke. All the pieces of himself that he had forced into some semblance of normalcy came apart. He was a child again, in the arms of his mother who always smelled of soap and dirt and home. He soaked the front of his shishu's jacket. He trembled and choked on soundless sobs.

But he also felt *safe.*

When was the last time he had ever felt *safe?*

Luo Binghe did not expect to fall back asleep.

The last thing he remembered was Liu Qingge easing the both of them back down on the bed, and running a hand through his hair. "You're not dirty," he whispered. "You're wanted. You're safe, Binghe. You're safe and you're home."

Luo Binghe woke with his face buried in someone's neck and holding someone's hand. Their fingers were threaded together. They had been that way long enough for the tips of his fingers to go numb. His eyes peeled open. Dried tears crusted his lashes. His face felt swollen and his eyes puffy.

But he was rested.

The shades on the windows completely blocked out all the daylight, so it was difficult to tell what time of day it was. Luo Binghe did not want to move to find out. If he moved, then Liu Qingge might push him away. And right now, he was dusted with warmth and comfort. Upsetting that seemed like a crime.

"You're awake," Liu Qingge accused, voice in a low whisper.

Luo Binghe smiled, and did not answer. His nose brushed against his shishu's neck and his eyes fluttered shut. He took a quiet and long breath in. He smelled the salty sprinkling of sweat, along with some lingering perfume. Under that, it was wholly Liu Qingge. He was beginning to really love that smell.

"Binghe."

When did Liu Qingge start referring to him so casually? It made him giddy.

"Help."

The request surprised Luo Binghe. With a sigh, he opened his eyes and, very slowly, he moved. He pushed up onto his elbow and rested his chin on his hand. He spotted the "problem" immediately.

While he had smothered Liu Qingge on his left, with his face buried in his neck, another koala had clung to his shishu's right.

Shen Yuan was behind that hand that held onto Luo Binghe, his thumb twitching every now and then. Both of their hands rested on his shishu's stomach. His cheek was smashed against Liu Qingge's shoulder, and he had a leg thrown over him. It made Luo Binghe's heart swell. He flashed his shishu a confused glance. "This one-"

"Cut the shit," Liu Qingge hissed, face red. "Please."

Grinning, Luo Binghe shrugged. "This Binghe thinks that… his shishu will just have to suffer."

"*Binghe."*

With a pointed yawn, he dropped back down and shamelessly snuggled back in.

To his shock, Liu Qingge did not push him away.

Instead, his shishu sighed reluctantly.

Shen Yuan was like a beloved grumpy cat. If that cat decided to deem you worthy of a pillow, how could you ever anger the gods by waking him up and pushing him away? The answer was: you didn't. You always let your body wither away first before you even *dared* to move.

Besides, Luo Binghe was greedy. His thumb traced lightly over his shizun's hand. He stole warmth from his shishu. It was a dream. *Safe. Home. Wanted.* Those words repeated in his head. He dozed.

A strangled sound from Liu Qingge woke Luo Binghe. His eyes flashed open just in time to catch his shishu's head roll back, face tight as if in pain. He grit his teeth, with his eyebrows knitted together. The entirety of his face was bright red. Luo Binghe used his arm on his shishu's chest to leverage himself up, wondering what was hurting him. As soon as he stirred, his shishu tried folding away his reaction into a meditative calm.

Liu Qingge lay with his arms at his sides. It was, of course, an extremely disciplined position to sleep in. Even after an entire night of rest, his braided hair was hardly mussed. One of his eyes cracked open, and he glared at Luo Binghe disapprovingly.

Still sleeping, Shen Yuan still clung to Liu Qingge-

Ah.

Unable to help his own glee, Luo Binghe smirked.

His shizun had thrown off some of his blankets in his sleep and moved closer. At some point, he had hooked his leg around one of Liu Qingge's. His hips sandwiched his shidi's arm to his side. There was only a thin layer of fabric, a delicious pair of very revealing shorts, separating the natural morning reactions of someone's body and Liu Qingge's arm. Not to mention, the large shirt Shen Yuan wore, *Luo Binghe's shirt,* had ridden up his torso. A *lot* of skin was on display.

Luo Binghe knew for a *fact* that his shishu hadn't been in pain earlier. He was holding back a *reaction.*

The thought sent a delighted chill up his spine.

Heat slowly simmered in his gut. He had seen the way his shizun and shishu looked at each other, and he wanted them to act on it. He had to be careful and delicate with his pushes. Right now, if they woke Shen Yuan, his shizun might lose too much face.

"What." Liu Qingge glared at Luo Binghe.

"Just thinking about breakfast," Luo Binghe lied, sweetly. He turned demure eyes towards his shishu. "Is something hurting Liu-shishu? This one apologizes…"

Face an impressive crimson, Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes. "Binghe."

Luo Binghe wondered how far he could push his shishu before he snapped. Grabbing at him hadn't done anything so far. Neither had cuddling. When would his shishu decide that it was too much, that he was too much, and push him away?

"I'll help," he said, smiling.

As he moved, he couldn't stop himself from patting his shishu consolingly. He plucked his pillow, mostly unused throughout the night, and crawled off the bed. With care, he tiptoed around the bed and leaned over his shizun.

His heart warmed.

Before the Immortal Conference, Luo Binghe's favorite time in the day was the morning. He got to see his shizun in a way no one else ever did. It was before his shizun was awake enough to pull on all of his masks, with his hair messy and his expression still half asleep. As Luo Binghe reached over, he felt his heart begin to hop between his ribs. Touching his shizun always felt so bold, and it was no different now. He drew his fingers around a delicate wrist and lifted his arm off Liu Qingge.

"Slow," Luo Binghe murmured.

With the expert care of surgeons, both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge managed to get out of bed without waking Shizun. In his shishu's place, Shen Yuan clutched tight onto a pillow. Luo Binghe smiled, and tucked the blankets up and around his shoulders. Then he escaped from the room, following his shishu out to the seating room. He gently shut the door behind him.

As his shishu disappeared into the bathroom, Luo Binghe rushed into the kitchen to prepare some tea. There was a large learning curve on preparing tea in this world. It was nothing like he was used to. A strange kettle was hooked into the wall; with a press of a button, the water heated to a boil.

Dozens of different types of tea filled the cabinets. Some were pre-packaged into tea bags, others left loose in careful containers. After perusing through the different types, he found a suitable tea for the morning.

Liu Qingge came back out of the bathroom.

To Luo Binghe's shock, he hadn't changed back into his other pants.

"There's nothing to eat, right?" Liu Qingge asked.

"N-No."

Liu Qingge straightened, as if surprised by the flustered response. His ears turned red, but the smallest of satisfied smiles quirked the corner of his lips. It was gone in an instant. "Let's figure out the phone."

"Mn!"

In a few minutes, both of them sat on the couch with the phone between them. Liu Qingge had disappeared back into the bedroom to snatch it from the nightstand, and he had used Shen Yuan's face to unlock it. Now, the two of them perused through different breakfast options.

Luo Binghe tried his luck and scooted closer until his thighs brushed his shishu's. His heart pounded. He forced his face to remain clear as he focused on the food on the screen.

Beside him, his shishu tensed slightly. His thumb paused. Then a moment later, he continued. The worst part about deciding what to eat for breakfast was that neither really *knew* what Shen Yuan could or couldn't eat. So they decided to get something similar to what he had chosen the night before.

Food ordered, they set the phone aside and sat in amicable silence.

The mug warmed the palms of Luo Binghe's hands. He leaned back against the couch, thigh still pressed to his shishu, as he turned his attention towards the large sliding glass door. Morning light filtered into the seating area. A slight fog clung to the air, turning the morning into a cozy gray haze. He felt eyes on him.

"Nightmares from the Abyss?" Liu Qingge asked.

Luo Binghe dropped his eyes into the cup. Pieces of the previous night trickled into his mind. He had the vague recollection of trying to claw apart his shishu, and his face stretched in a mix of shock and horror. "Did this beast hurt-?"

“No,” Liu Qingge said with a frown. Then he amended, “Yes. Nothing that matters.” He waved away his concern, and continued, “You warned me. I did it anyway.”

I did it anyway.

Luo Binghe felt as if he were tethered by a single thread. It threatened to snap at any moment. He was half convinced that he might wake up at any moment and find himself back in the Abyss. That everything leading up to this moment was nothing but a wishful hallucination.

“...why?” Luo Binghe watched his shishu, eyebrows tightening together. “Why… are you…” *Being so nice?*

There was a twitch on Liu Qingge’s lips, like he almost smiled. He dropped his gaze, unable to meet Luo Binghe’s eyes whenever the conversation slid into the dangerous path of *emotions*. “What did I say? You are a disciple of the Cang Qiong Sect.”

“You… don’t even treat your *own* disciples like this,” Luo Binghe pointed out, warily. He had the irrational fear that if he pointed this out, his shishu would make that realization as well and stop. Even with that potential threat, Luo Binghe selfishly didn’t want to *just* be a disciple to Liu Qingge. He wanted more.

“Mn,” Liu Qingge considered. As usual, when asked a question or when he observed something new, he did not speak right away. More often than not, a lot of time would pass before he brought it up again. If he ever did.

It was something that Luo Binghe was slowly beginning to admire. He thought of the conversation last night that his shishu and his shizun had.

“Who you are, all that you are, is all that you need to be.”

No one would have expected such a line from the war god. In fact, if Luo Binghe told anyone that *Liu Qingge* was the one who said it, he doubted they would believe him. He was learning new sides of two people, and he was getting hungrier with every little morsel that dropped into his hands. At any point, they would decide he was too much. And they would push him away-

You are wanted.

Liu Qingge had said that. Shouldn’t Luo Binghe give him the grace of believing him?

“Disciples of Bai Zhan go through rigorous and difficult training, but it is never to break them.” Liu Qingge stared into his cup. “When one is injured, they are cared for. They are hard headed and strong, but still instructed to reach out if they need help. Cultivators need to be strong on their own, but also need to know when to rely on others. I did not go to Jin Lan City alone. I brought allies.” He looked Luo Binghe in the eye. “You went through a troubling ordeal that should not have happened. You require help. That’s all there is to it.”

“You would never hold a Bai Zhan disciple and tell them-“ Luo Binghe started, and was surprised at the emotion in his voice. Tears blurred his eyes and he ducked his chin. It wasn’t

an act this time.

Last night had made him feel weak in a way he hadn't allowed himself to be in a long time. Between the revelations and the nightmares and the rotting mess of his heart, he was clinging onto a single thread of sanity. He hated how quickly he broke again, with his sight disappearing into a mess of tears. His shoulders bunched up next to his ears, and he tried to pull in a breath to stop himself from breaking apart again.

At some point, his shishu would get tired of all of this.

Both his shizun and shishu would push him away.

They would scorn him for being such an insatiable and selfish beast.

Liu Qingge patted his head. "No. I would not."

It was strange to hear that, as if Luo Binghe had spoken his concerns aloud. He vaguely recalled what he last said. Frustratingly, his shishu left it there. No other explanation was offered. But at the very least, Luo Binghe was able to let go of his shame and fall into his shishu's lap.

He wasn't pushed away.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

3.7k reading time 19 min.

CW: Chronic illness, thoughts of dying, negative thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The shutters on his windows were set to open at ten in the morning. Light flooded into Shen Yuan's room and woke him up. He stared bleary-eyed at unfamiliar surroundings. His body hurt. Like rust had grown on his joints and moving meant that pieces scraped and broke off. The thought of getting up and crawling out of bed made him want to cry. His sleepy mind told him he should call for Mu Qingfang, because Without a Cure was acting up in a horrid way.

Except that this was just his everyday life. Well. What was left of it.

His bladder screamed, and he heard quiet voices out in the living room. His disciple and his shidi were alone. Together. That realization terrified him enough to chase him out of bed. He found his cane, because he would certainly need it today, and padded across the room. Somehow he managed to put on a pair of pants. He opened the door and saw Luo Binghe sprawled out on the couch with his head in Liu Qingge's lap. His brain woke up just enough for a friendly reminder:

He slept in the same bed as both of these men.

(While not wearing pants.)

Ah!

To think the first time he would ever invite someone into his bed would be *two men!*

But… wasn't that a normal thing? They were just guys sharing a bed together. Wasn't it usual for sports teams and such? When they went on overnight trips? It wasn't weird, or anything. It was just some dudes.

Just some incredibly handsome and ridiculously attractive dudes.

(He was straight?)

(*Why was that a question?)*

Luo Binghe paused only long enough in his story to wave and say, “Good morning, Shizun! And so, the Vanishing Stalker Lily Tiger was able to dive into the water, and it disappeared among the reeds… this disciple was unable to catch even a single whiff of its qi!”

There was a slight curve to Liu Qingge’s lips as he nodded and listened. He did not interrupt, even if there was a question in his eyes. Shen Yuan had one himself: the hidden weakness of the Vanishing Stalker Lily Tiger was its smell. All one had to do was follow the pungent scent to find it. Did Luo Binghe figure that out?

Before he could figure that out, Shen Yuan disappeared into the bathroom to prepare for the day. There was a stranger in the mirror. He did his best to ignore the alien feeling in his chest and instead managed to put the stranger into *some* semblance of order. At least his hair wasn’t a complete mess. Though he couldn’t do anything about the almost-dead gaunt of his complexion.

It was an odd feeling, watching his body wither away day by day.

(Especially after living as an Immortal Master.)

When he stepped back out into the livingroom, his two guests had moved to the table where a spread of dishes were waiting for them.

By the smell alone, Shen Yuan wished he could eat anything he liked! He missed his old body-

It was never his.

That body had been taken by force. He benefited from it, certainly, but it was never *his*.

What if Shen Yuan never got to return to PIDW…?

That line of thought slammed his heart into his guts. The pang was so resounding, he almost couldn’t breathe. He had to take a moment to tuck that thought into a little box. Then he locked that box, and stuffed it into another box. Then he took that box and stuffed it somewhere deep inside him. His solution?

Never think about it again.

Ever.

“Shen Yuan?” Liu Qingge asked.

His shidi was standing in front of him, with concern pinching his eyebrows together. Shen Yuan blinked, and he flashed him a small smile. “Liu-shidi!” Then his smile froze. Was that even something he should call Liu Qingge anymore? It wasn’t like he had ever earned the title of peak lord. Who was he to call himself Liu Qingge’s shixiong? “Liu…” His eyebrows folded together, as he struggled to figure out how to address the man in front of him.

“Qingge.”

Shen Yuan paused.

“I am your shidi,” Liu Qingge affirmed, leaving no room for argument. “Qingge is fine.” His ears were red.

Shock stole any response that Shen Yuan might have had. His face grew hot. He opened his mouth for an argument, and found that he didn’t know what he would argue. Before he could say anything, he was ushered to their breakfast.

At the table, a plate was set in front of Shen Yuan along with a cup of tea. He stared down at the food, and pressed his lips into a thin line as he considered it. His stomach was still uncertain from last night, and frankly the plate was unappetizing. He raised the tea to his lips and hoped that it would remind his stomach that food was indeed something it should want.

Luo Binghe chose that moment to ask, “If Yuan-gege can call Liu-shishu ‘Qingge,’ then does that mean Qingge calls him ‘Yuan-gege’ too?”

Shen Yuan choked.

Embarrassment colored Liu Qingge’s face. “D-Disrespectful!”

Resting his head on his hand, Luo Binghe fluttered his eyelashes and smirked. “This disciple apologizes, Liu-shishu.”

“Only apologize if you mean it,” Liu Qingge grumbled. He started to fill his plate.

Then Luo Binghe jumped on it. “Here, Liu-shishu!”

After everyone’s plates were filled, Shen Yuan said, “You can, if you want to.” Two pairs of eyes turned to him. Reddening, he quickly amended, “Not… ‘gege’.” He threw a sharp look at Luo Binghe. “But Yuan is fine.”

Liu Qingge stared at him as if he sprouted another head.

Throwing his hands in the air, Shen Yuan stammered, “There’s no courtesy names here. So. It’s… not weird, or anything. And if we get back to PIDW, then of course, you can’t just… call me that. But you can when we’re alone!”

“Then… Mingbo.”

A strange noise escaped Luo Binghe, and he dropped food back onto his plate.

Face bright red, Liu Qingge scowled down at his table. “That’s… the rules here, yes? It is what you will call me in front of your sister.”

That… was a fair point. And it also brought up the issue that if he introduced Luo Binghe to his sister, there is absolutely no way that his name wouldn’t ring any bells. The two of them often liked to have rant-trades. For her, it usually was about whatever nonsense danmei she was reading. For him, it was whatever trashy series angered him the most. That trashy series was *usually* PIDW.

Wait. What did Liu Qingge say!? That it would be what Shen Yuan *will* call him?! As if they were going to see his sister???! As if it was a *guarantee!?* "You-" He choked. "No! We are *not* meeting my sister!"

Luo Binghe grinned. "But she was so eager to meet us, Yuan-gege!"

"She will *never* believe that you're not my boyfriends if you call me that!" Shen Yuan grit through his teeth.

The fakest pout filled Luo Binghe's lips and he turned big eyes towards Shen Yuan. "The nurses called me your boyfriend, Yuan-gege! I just thought that's what we were…"

"You don't even know what a boyfriend *is* Binghe!" Shen Yuan snapped. Not for the first time, he was glad that his apartment was expensive enough to have sound-proof walls and that none of his neighbors would be calling the cops.

Not that they ever really would otherwise… They would be used to him shouting to himself.

"Shizun can teach me?" Luo Binghe said, slowly popping a piece of fruit in his mouth. Why did that seem flirtatious?

Why did it seem like Binghe was flirting?

"It's… not relevant," Shen Yuan glared down at his plate. His pure white lotus has changed so much! Was it the world they were in, or had he changed because of the blackening? Why did it seem like his prized disciple was teasing him relentlessly?! Ah! Unfair. To save himself from the boyfriend line of questioning, he asked, "What's in these?"

The change of topic was not lost on Luo Binghe. As always, his disciple was too sharp for his own good. He did not press it, and instead listed off the ingredients for him. "We matched the ingredients with what you got last night."

"Ah." Liu Qingge glanced up. "Your medication, Yuan."

Somehow, Shen Yuan did not expect his name. His face colored, and he felt his stomach try and leap out of his throat. Ahh!! Why did he feel like his crush just noticed him for the first time!? He murmured, "Thank you, Qingge," and grabbed his cane and fled from the table to go take his medicine. He didn't have the face to call him by his birthname!

What he did not see, as he fled, was Liu Qingge almost dropping his chopsticks and flooding with color.

The rest of their breakfast went by without too much trouble. Luo Binghe continued to test his shishu's tastebuds, and made sure both of their cups were full. At the end of their meal, Luo Binghe cleared away the dishes. He was still wearing the same pajama pants from last night. It was meant to be a stretchy, light, and loose pair. On Luo Binghe they were skin tight.

Shen Yuan found his face heating as his eyes followed the strong curve of his thighs, and… ah! He tore his eyes away and stared down at his hands. What was he *doing?!* That was the

protagonist! And he was straight!! Why… was he reacting this way?

Was it just the charms of the protagonist?

“Yuan,” Liu Qingge stood beside his chair, and offered him his cane.

There really was too much dick in this apartment, wasn’t there? Even Liu Qingge still wore the stupidly thin pajamas! It! Was!! Too much!

Shen Yuan tried *not* to look. He failed. His mouth went dry. *Anyone* would be losing themselves with this eye candy, right?! *Fuck.* What would he do if the war god caught him staring? He would most likely end up through a wall! His face was hot, and he murmured a thank-you. When he dared a glance up, he saw a certain look in his shidi’s eyes. Was that… satisfaction?

Huh?

“We… should probably get you two some clothes,” Shen Yuan said, and he was very proud of himself for not squeaking! He pushed himself up, and took a moment to balance against the table. Everything *hurt.* Today was going to be a bad day. He eased past Liu Qingge, and found his way towards his favorite chair and sank into it.

“Shouldn’t we figure out a way to get back?” Liu Qingge asked. He followed him to the sitting area and perched on the arm of the couch, facing Shen Yuan. *This angle was not helping, Qingge!!*

Hello??

What happened to the scandalized man in a crop top!?

(*Do NOT start thinking about that!)*

Pondering the question and keeping his eyes away from anyone’s legs, Shen Yuan wrapped a blanket around himself. He hoped the heat would soothe some of his aches. Or if he was lucky, his medication would kick in. “Last time we just… went back. There was no real prompting.”

Liu Qingge frowned. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. His eyes scoured Shen Yuan’s face. A question brewed in his eyes.

Feeling the full force of his attention, Shen Yuan shrank. Then there was a buzz on the table. “Oh!” He lurched forward and snatched the source of the noise: his phone. “How did the two of you order food?”

“Your face unlocks it,” Liu Qingge said. The corner of his mouth still dragged down. He was unhappy to have to hold off his question.

“I should probably just tell you my password, so you don’t have to do that,” Shen Yuan said, ignoring the latest text from his sister. “Come here.”

The frown lessened, and his shidi moved to the chair. He leaned over the back of it, his long hair slipping off his shoulder and tickling the side of Shen Yuan's neck. He watched the screen intensely.

Shen Yuan started with the first character, and then froze.

Fuck.

"Ah! Wait!" Shen Yuan said with half a laugh. "I can just… make the password easier!"

Liu Qingge's lips pulled down, again. "I do not need it easy, Yuan."

"No!" Shen Yuan choked. Now the war god thought he was calling him *stupid!* "That's not it!"

Eyes slid to him. Liu Qingge stared at him, flatly.

"Qingge," Shen Yuan pleaded. "Please." He twisted in the chair, and caught one of his shidi's hands, staring into his eyes. "I am *not* questioning your intelligence! I know you. You're blunt, but just because you don't wast time explaining your thoughts doesn't mean you're any less knowledgable. And I really admire you for it!" He squeezed his hand, hoping that his honesty shone through. "I mean it."

Surprised, the war god retreated slightly. His lips parted, and color flooded his cheeks. His eyes fell to Shen Yuan's lips.

Um. Embarrassing! Did he have food stuck between his teeth?? Or maybe his breath smelled…

"Fine." Liu Qingge hesitated for half a breath, before he dropped an elbow on the back of the chair and leaned closer to Shen Yuan. He watched him with a hesitant and heavy-lidded expression. "Change it."

Shen Yuan was caught. The two of them were close. So close, in fact, that he smelled breakfast on the war god's breath. His throat tightened.

"Yuan?" Liu Qingge prompted, raising an eyebrow.

"R-Right," Shen Yuan stammered. He turned back to his phone, and tapped in the password.

Wait.

A soft sound left Liu Qingge.

Heat rose into Shen Yuan's cheeks, and he slammed a hand over his face.

"The password won't get any easier than that, Yuan."

Shen Yuan dropped the phone and used *both* hands to cover his face.

“Oh?” Luo Binghe asked, still working on the dishes. “What is the password?”

Of all things, there was a smile on Liu Qingge’s face. It was quiet and soft, with a teasing bite to it. “Hm.”

“Qingge,” Shen Yuan whined into his hands. This was *humiliating.*

Mirth lit Liu Qingge’s eyes. He tracked around the chair and dropped down on the table in front of Shen Yuan. “No need to worry about us forgetting the password, at least.” He set his elbows on his knees, again, facing Shen Yuan.

Cute smile be damned!! Liu Qingge was such a menace!

Sighing, Shen Yuan shook his head and set his phone aside. He rested his face in a hand, still attempting to shield some of the blush that rose to his face.

“Yuan.” The humor from Liu Qingge faded. All of his intensity narrowed in on Shen Yuan, and there was a fierce determination in his eyes. “Tell me what happened in Jin Lan City. In the alley.”

Hesitation stole his voice. Shen Yuan threw a glance towards his disciple (was he really still his disciple?) in the kitchen. Luo Binghe seemed occupied by the dishes, though no doubt he was keeping a keen ear out on what was happening between the two of them. He smoothed out some wrinkles on his blanket. “It was just Binghe and I…” He hadn’t necessarily wanted to explain to his shidi that he was running from his own disciple, because he *also* didn’t want to go into *why* he was running. “I was attempting to call on the System for some… information on what was happening with Binghe. I wanted to alleviate some of the tension between the two of us. And somehow, he sensed it while checking my meridians.” He glanced up. “Without a Cure acted up earlier that day.”

Liu Qingge frowned, troubled. “Why didn’t you call on me? Or tell Mu Qingfang?”

Waving his hand through the air, Shen Yuan shook his head, “Why? Mu-shidi was busy trying to figure out a cure, and you were hunting down the sowers. It isn’t a big deal.”

Eyes narrowing, Liu Qingge shook his head. “Still. You should have told us.”

“*Anyways,”* Shen Yuan pressed on, not wanting to have this argument with his shidi again, “Binghe then… attacked it, the System, with his qi. I can only guess that whatever the attack did, it caused a disruption with the System and it threw us back here.”

Liu Qingge hummed in thought.

“What I can’t figure out is how the two of you got your own *bodies*,” Shen Yuan continued, “Did they exist already? How did you end up in my apartment?” Without thinking, he leaned over and grabbed Liu Qingge’s face and squished his cheeks. “You *feel* real.”

Both of them paused.

A blush turned Liu Qingge’s pale face red, and he stared in bafflement.

“Oh,” Shen Yuan said, voice small. He quickly snapped back his hands. Fuck. *Ah!* He just pinched the War God of Bai Zhan’s cheeks!! What the hell was he thinking!?

Instead of going off on a rampage, Liu Qingge just swallowed. He collected himself and said, “You… feel real, as well. And this body, although without cultivation, feels normal.” He glared down at his hands. “Except weaker.”

The embarrassment of touching Liu Qingge still cooked Shen Yuan’s skin. He turned his head away, the corner of his lip curling wrly, and said, “Welcome to my world.” He wanted something to do with his hands. Why did it suddenly feel *awkward* that he had hands? “Ah. Um. Anyways.” He settled with folding his hands in his lap. “All we need to do is get back to PIDW and let the System start repairing itself again. Which means… Binghe has to stay close for a bit.”

“Hm.” Leaning back, Liu Qingge threw a glance towards the kitchen.

“Why me?” Luo Binghe asked, unable to pretend any longer that he wasn’t eavesdropping.

Shen Yuan fell silent, again. How would he begin to explain!? *Oh, right! You’re the star of the stallion novel I’m obsessed with! Do you know how many sex scenes of yours I skimmed over? Go ahead. Give a guess! Oh! And the System, that thing you broke, uses you as a power source!*

Before he could flounder any further, Liu Qingge spoke up, “You’re the protagonist.” His face squished in a mix of frustration and discomfort. “Of the book.”

Startled, Shen Yuan threw him a glance.

Liu Qingge caught the look and threw him an aggrieved glance that said, *Didn’t you just say you didn’t think I was stupid?*

A blush settled over Shen Yuan’s cheeks. “Qingge is right.” The room fell quiet as Luo Binghe digested that little bomb. The war god kept staring at Shen Yuan, which finally made him flustered enough to blurt. “What?”

“...Luo Binghe,” his shidi called.

“Yes, Shishu?” Luo Binghe perked. He dried off his hands, and walked over. As he reached the back of the couch, he hopped over it and settled down on the cushion.

“Your side.” Liu Qingge turned to look at him. “What happened?”

Luo Binghe paused. His eyes slid to Shen Yuan, and drew back to his shishu. “I went to meet Shizun again after securing the sowers. I…” His face fell. “I had wanted to tell him…”

“Binghe worked very hard,” Shen Yuan said and he forced the smallest of smiles even as his heart sank with pain. All Luo Binghe wanted that night was to have his head patted and to be told he did a job well-done.

Even with a demure dip of his head, Luo Binghe could not hide the way he perked up from the praise. “Shizun ran from me, though Without a Cure was acting up.” His eyes darkened, and he frowned in displeasure. “This disciple caught up with him quickly. And this disciple behaved…” Luo Binghe’s eyes watered. “This beast had no excuses-”

“*Binghe,”* Shen Yuan admonished. His heart was in his throat.

“This lowly one hurt his shizun,” Luo Binghe said, his jaw setting stubbornly. It was a strange contrast to the glittering tears in his eyes. It ached to see him hate himself this much. Shen Yuan shifted on the chair, ready to throw his blankets aside.

Shockingly, Liu Qingge reached out and patted Luo Binghe’s head. “We will get to that. What happened?”

“This lowly one had trained hard to read energies. The Abyss had many well-hidden creatures. As hidden as they were, they often left some sort of disturbance one way or another. This disciple sensed something different from his shizun.” Luo Binghe sighed. “This beast… thought Shizun was calling for help. That it was a spell that shizun learned, connecting him to Liu-shishu.” From underneath wet eyelashes, Luo Binghe looked up at his shishu. “That was who Shizun kept calling out to. You.”

Why was *that* part important!?

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan grumbled.

Ears coloring, Liu Qingge said, “Continue.”

“This lowly one read Shizun’s meridians, and found a disturbance there. He intended to break the spell. When he found a place where the spell was tethered, he attacked it.” Luo Binghe dropped his gaze, most likely remembering in vivid detail what happened after that. “It… siphoned off Shizun to repair itself. It was killing him. This disciple attempted to transfer qi into Shizun, and…” He frowns. “This disciple woke up in this world.”

Liu Qingge fell quiet, pondering.

During his pondering silence, Luo Binghe decided to take the time to ask a question. “Shizun?”

“Mn?”

“What’s the password?”

Shen Yuan bit his tongue to stop himself from making a sound. He covered his face with a hand.

The corner of Liu Qingge’s lip quirked. “Binghe.”

“Yes, Shishu?” He straightened.

Liu Qingge did not answer. He stared Shen Yuan in the eye, mirth dancing in his eyes. “Yuan. You said we need clothes.”

“Yes.” Shen Yuan ignored his disciple’s confused look, and he shuffled to the edge of his chair. “Who needs to figure out the shower?”

Despite any other attempts Luo Binghe made to learn the password, no one answered him. Only sometimes would Liu Qingge answer with a near sly smile and say, “Binghe.”

Chapter End Notes

I waffled a lot between giving Liu Qingge a birth name or not, and I know people's preferences swing one way or another. If it's helpful at all, the birth name only ever will come up in the "modern" realm.

溟波 - Mingbō - sea storm or sea surge

I did some research on the name, as well as going to a large community and seeing their thoughts on the matter. In the end, I unfortunately am only questionably fluent in two languages, and neither are useful in this case, so please forgive any mistakes on my part.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Around 3,700 words, which can be a 18 minute reading time.

CW: Nothing! (I am pretty sure)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The three of them were ready to go outside. Liu Qingge was restless. He shifted from one foot to the other, trapped once again in the too-tight, stiff fabric that Shen Yuan referred to as "jeans." He disliked wearing clothes he had slept in. It was improper — and sometimes only somewhat acceptable when he was on missions in the wild. But there was nothing he could do about that. The only other option was to pull back on that first shirt he wore, and nothing would ever get him back in *that.*

(Not, unless, it was to get two pairs of eyes to ogle him again. He had *not* forgotten the way Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan had stared at him-)

What was he thinking?

Liu Qingge rolled back and forth on the balls of his feet. His brain didn't do well when he didn't exercise or push himself. Right now, there were so many thoughts inside his head it was as if someone was constantly screaming in his ears. Part of him wanted to see if Luo Binghe would spar with him, hand to hand. Then he started thinking about being pinned to the ground, and that led to a (humiliating) series of images that didn't *really* have to do with fighting.

"You don't have a hood this time." Shen Yuan's voice drifted from his bedroom. He moved past the doorway searching for something. He wore a brand new set of clothes: a large, comfortable knit top with a white shirt underneath it. His jeans had holes in them. If the holes weren't placed so purposely and frayed a certain way, Liu Qingge would have worried whether or not Shen Yuan could *afford* to buy them clothes.

Money did not seem to be a question for him at all.

Stepping up beside the front door, Luo Binghe turned his attention towards the bedroom. He wore his jeans with the top he slept in and a leather jacket. (There was so much new vocabulary that Liu Qingge was learning.) His curly hair had been tamed after the shower, and now dried partially frizzy due to Shen Yuan's poor selection of hair care. Not that it did anything to dampen Luo Binghe's natural beauty. As if sensing his stare, the cheeky brat

dropped his chin and looked over at Liu Qingge from underneath his eyelashes. The corner of his lips curled into a pleased and teasing smile.

“What.” Liu Qingge tried, by pure force of will alone, to stop his blush.

He was unsuccessful.

“Does Liu-shishu need anything from this one?” Luo Binghe asked demurely.

Before he could even think of a way to answer that, Shen Yuan said, “Ah ha! I found them!” In a few moments, he stepped out of his bedroom. Each step with the cane was heavy and hard, as if he put more of his weight onto it. He stopped in front of Luo Binghe. “Here. These will help with the lights.” He held a strange hat and some sort of… mask? “This is called a ‘baseball cap,’ though you can just call it a hat. And these are sunglasses. Here. Try them on.” He motioned for Luo Binghe to lean down.

It… really was adorable how small he was.

Liu Qingge caught himself, not for the first time, with the insatiable need to pick up Shen Yuan and squeeze him.

…he really needed to go on a jog. Or maybe he should ask Luo Binghe to spar with him. His thoughts were all over the place.

Luo Binghe leaned down, allowing his shizun to brush aside his hair.

There was a slight pause, and Shen Yuan’s cheeks blossomed with a light pink. “Binghe… I am sorry. This is the only hat I have that’s not… ridiculous.” He hesitantly turned the face of the baseball cap towards him. There was a demon mark on the front of it. A zuiyin.

Luo Binghe’s eyes widened ever so slightly. Both he and Shen Yuan flashed Liu Qingge side-eyed glances.

Those two really weren’t subtle, were they?

If Liu Qingge did *not* get moving soon, he might just punch someone for the fun of it. He gave the hat a critical glance, and cocked his head slightly with a raised eyebrow. “Another gift from your sister?” he asked.

Relieved to have an explanation for the demonic hat, Shen Yuan said, “Yes! It was.” He placed the hat on Luo Binghe, and moved aside some of his hair. Whenever he was focused on a task, it seemed that his hands were freer and he did not restrain himself by propriety.

Liu Qingge felt an odd mix of emotions. Jealousy was one, seeing Luo Binghe preen under the gentle administration. And the other…

The other was a strange warmth in his chest. Almost like finding the last piece to a puzzle. Or watching someone you care for receive a gift.

With the sunglasses on, and small devices placed in the disciple's ears, it seemed as if they were *finally* ready. "They're noise minimizing," Shen Yuan explained. "It should help. But I ordered us a car, so you should be okay for a bit. How does it all feel?"

"Great, Yuan-gege!" Luo Binghe said. Unadulterated adoration warmed his eyes as he watched his shizun.

It should have been embarrassing or shameless. Instead, Liu Qingge found that odd knot of… something in his chest again.

(Fuck.)

"Ready?" Liu Qingge restrained himself from squirming. He wanted to bolt free. His brain focused on, *Go? Go. Go. Go… Time? To? Go? Now? Let's go. Go!* It was difficult to stop himself from doing anything else.

"If you start feeling overwhelmed," Shen Yuan said, turning his attention towards Liu Qingge. "Let me know. We can pull your hood up, and I am also bringing headphones or anything else you guys might need." He held up a pack.

"Right." Liu Qingge nodded. Because he couldn't help himself, he added, "Ready?" *Go? We go? Now?*

"Shizun takes care of us so well," Luo Binghe purred.

Skin dusting pink, Shen Yuan murmured, "Binghe. Of course. It's quite the change for both of you-"

"*Yuan."* Liu Qingge put his hand on the doorknob. "Binghe. Ready?"

Luo Binghe took a second to consider him, then the corner of his lip pulled in startled delight as if he had discovered something new. "Yes, Liu-shishu. This Binghe is ready."

"Um… about that?" His slow shixiong said with a wince.

"Tell us on the way down," Luo Binghe offered.

Liu Qingge opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

"You guys… are going to have to speak a little differently. More informal."

Whatever. Informal was fine. It really wasn't as if he was married to speaking formal himself. There were too many words for simple things and it was stupid. Liu Qingge did not know where to go from here, but they were at the end of a long hall and there was only one direction to go. He went. Behind him, Luo Binghe said, "So… Yuan-gege? And Ming-gege?"

Liu Qingge nearly ran into a wall.

When he whipped around, the cheeky disciple had that stupid innocent look on his face, and Shen Yuan was trying his best to swallow a laugh. His hand fluttered up to cover an amused smirk.

What. The. *Fuck?*

“Uh. A-Anyways… no titles. It’s… different here,” his shixiong offered. He failed at stopping a little huff of laughter in between his pauses.

“Alright,” Luo Binghe said, smiling mischievously. “Ming-gege, is something wrong?”

“*Not* ‘gege’,” Liu Qingge tried to snap with all the authority he’s learned as the Bai Zhan peak lord. Instead he choked.

“So… I can call you Mingbo?”

“D-Disrespectful…” Liu Qingge’s voice failed him as Luo Binghe took a step towards him. Behind him, Shen Yuan decided it was best to hide his laughter by pretending to be busy with locking his door.

There was a sly tilt to Luo Binghe’s lips. He stopped just a breath away from Liu Qingge. Sunglasses lowered to the tip of his nose, he examined Liu Qingge’s face. There was something vulnerable in his eyes.

Liu Qingge realized this was a test to see if he would reject him. He could. Very easily, he could take a step back and demand to be referred to as “Liu” or even by “Qingge.” It wouldn’t be uncalled for. They might have known each other for a few years now, but they weren’t close. Hell, the first time they ever held a real conversation with just the two of them hadn’t been that long ago. He wondered why it was so important to Luo Binghe to be accepted by him. Of all people! Why not his peers? Why not his shizun? Why *him?*

Then he remembered that the one person that Luo Binghe loved and trusted had cast him aside and threw him into the Abyss.

Of *course* the needy brat would need more stability and assurances.

A long sigh left Liu Qingge. He grit his teeth and threw a light punch into Luo Binghe’s side. “Don't call me that back at the peaks. Or you'll run drills." To emphasize his point, he took a step forward and pulled on one of the fiercest glares he could muster. "Until you collapse.”

Luo Binghe lit up like the sun. His eyes widened, and the smile on his face was so bright and warm it was hard to look at. “Of course, Ming-gege!”

“*Binghe,”* Liu Qingge growled. “Not ‘gege’.”

Fuck.

He did not have the face for whatever the fuck this was, and somehow Luo Binghe knew that his objections weren’t *hard* objections. That fucking brat knew when to push and when to back off, and it was annoying as hell.

“But Ming-gege is so much older and wiser than this Binghe…”

Behind them, Shen Yuan barked a laugh that he tried to cover with a cough.

“Laugh all you want, *Yuan-gege,”* Liu Qingge spat.

The look on Shen Yuan’s face was…

Well. Liu Qingge turned and stormed down the hall to hide his own smile. He left the other two, one sputtering incoherently and the other looking thoughtful and a little inspired.

Outside sucked. There were too many people and loud noises. But Liu Qingge took one glance at a car and knew that he wanted to learn how to control it. He itched to sit behind the wheel and see just how fast that thing could go. The hunger in his eyes was not subtle. Shen Yuan looked more than a little worried, eying both him and the car.

Too bad they did not have the time for any lessons. All three climbed into the back, and there Shen Yuan walked them through his plans for the day. Luo Binghe ended up in the middle this time, pleased whenever his shizun leaned over him to show Liu Qingge something on his phone. The rocking motions of the car was strange to get used to, and did nothing to quell the itch he had on seeing how fast it could go.

If they were stuck here longer than a week, Liu Qingge was going to learn how to control a car.

(Really, he hoped they weren’t here for more than a day but… hey. *Fast*.)

The woman controlling the car dropped them off at a super-sized market. There were some stores tucked into buildings with vendors lining the walkways, and so many fucking signs and lights. Shen Yuan explained to them that this was a shopping district with more than a few places to buy clothes, food, and a myriad of other things. First plan of action: get clothes. Second plan of action: stock up on food.

To no one’s surprise, Luo Binghe got distracted by all the different food options. Vendors leaned out, waving good-smelling treats their way. There was far too much sugar on some of them, yet none of that deterred Luo Binghe and his eye for cuisine.

While he amicably talked up one of the vendors, Liu Qingge’s eyes caught a smaller booth. An older woman sat at a basic stall, tinkering with some sort of jewelry with her own gnarled hands. He drifted towards the hair pieces. From what he could tell, in Shen Yuan’s world men didn’t tend to dress their hair with any finery. It was a shame, really.

He caught sight of pale green jade and lifted it up.

Green. It was Shen Qingqiu. The color of bamboo.

“Ah… thinking of someone, are you?” The older woman asked with a gentle smile.

Yes, Liu Qingge thought. He straightened, “Beautiful.”

“Thank you,” the woman answered, “my wife makes most of them. She has the real eye for these things.” Her chin motioned towards the hair piece. “She made that one.”

“Mingbo,” Shen Yuan said, voice stuttering only slightly as he stepped up next to him. “Do you want that?”

Even in a different body, green fit Shen Yuan well. Liu Qingge nodded before he could think otherwise – what was the point in buying someone a gift if they had to buy it for themself? Currency was exchanged, and not before long the hair piece was theirs. Liu Qingge felt a little silly holding it in his hands.

The two of them drifted back towards the center of the market, both keeping a sharp eye on Luo Binghe. Somehow the brat had managed to convince a vendor into letting him *cook.*

“Would you like to put that on?” Shen Yuan asked.

Liu Qingge glanced over at him. He nodded.

“We can find a bathroom,” Shen Yuan said, and he looked around. “Or I…” His voice disappeared as Liu Qingge stepped in front of him.

“Stay still.” Liu Qingge ignored the blush on his face, and swept aside some of Shen Yuan’s hair. It was soft. He had to run his fingers through it a few times to wrestle it into shape, and then pinned a section of his hair back on the right side of his face. He stepped back and admired his work. The green suited Shen Yuan exceptionally well. It brought out the depths of color in his dark eyes, and played with the light flush of his cheeks.

He was truly handsome.

Mouth slightly agape, Shen Yuan reached up to lightly touch the hair piece. His eyes were wide. Every passing second, his face grew redder.

Liu Qingge’s heart felt like it was about to crawl up his throat.

This world, Shen Yuan’s world, had different rules. So, it was okay to do what he just did.

(That’s what he was telling himself.)

“...it was for me?” Shen Yuan asked. His voice was a bit breathy.

“Mn.” Liu Qingge ignored the cries of protest in the back of his head. *Disrespectful! Shameless!!* How dare he touch his shixiong in such a way? His palms were coated with sweat. He had slept in the same bed with this man, sure. But not in the way Liu Qingge yearned for. He felt guilty and was about to apologize for overstepping.

Then Shen Yuan smiled, slightly bashful. “We’re supposed to be getting *you* clothes, Mingbo. Not me.”

Something released in his chest, hearing his name. It softened his retort. “A hairpiece is not clothes.”

“...you got me there,” Shen Yuan said, and his smile widened even more. It was beautiful. It was *breathtaking*. It was hard not to lean down and kiss it off his face. “Come on, then. Let’s sit for a bit.”

The two of them found a bench underneath a tree. There wasn’t a lot of greenery in the middle of the city, and it was utilized as decoration more than anything else. Their seat at the bench gave them a full view of Luo Binghe as he charmed his way from one vendor to the next.

“You’re different,” Shen Yuan said, with hands in his lap and his eyes on his disciple. “Here.”

Liu Qingge made a sound as a question. He sat a reasonable distance from his shixiong, though close enough that if he let his legs relax their thighs would brush.

For a while, Shen Yuan thought about his next words. His lips pursed, and he played with the hairpiece. It was not a fan. Liu Qingge should look for a fan next. Though, selfishly, he loved seeing all the different expressions his shixiong always tried to hide.

“You’re more lenient with him,” Shen Yuan said, carefully. He glanced at Liu Qingge out of the corner of his eye. “Not that you’re not a nice person…”

Liu Qingge snorted. He was not a nice person. On the other hand, Shen Yuan *was* a kind person. It took a while for Liu Qingge to see that. Maybe because he always saw Shen Qingqiu first. “He needs it. We’ll have to figure something out about his qi deviation when we get back.” He frowned.

“Well… right now our other bodies are sort of laying in the ruins of my bamboo house,” Shen Yuan said, voice with a slight edge to it when he glanced at him.

“Blame your disciple,” Liu Qingge grumbled.

“You’re the *older* of the two of you!” his shixiong said with an admonishing huff.

“Yuan.” Liu Qingge glanced at him. “Look at him.” He motioned towards the man who was currently getting free samples. The simple motion hopefully said all that needed to be said: *he’s a man that can get a situation to play out how he wants.*

Shen Yuan sighed. “Fair.”

With a frown, Liu Qingge added, “I’ll fix it.”

Shaking his head, his shixiong playfully elbowed him. “No. It’s okay. Shang-shidi has probably already dealt with it. And Mu-shidi is probably already taking care of us. It’ll be

alright."

The warmth of the teasing jab spilled through Liu Qingge. He glanced over at his shixiong. There was a line neither of them had ever crossed, yet here in this world it seemed as if that line had become a blur. Suddenly, he was aware of each beat of his heart, staring into the depths of his shixiong's eyes. "Different rules," he said softly.

"Rules?" Shen Yuan asked.

They were close. Liu Qingge could see all the variations of blacks and browns within those eyes. When the sun hit his iris, it brought out the amber hues. Beautiful and elegant. Untouchable.

"Different rules. Here." Liu Qingge nodded, because he did not know how else to explain what he meant. Back in their world, it was improper to sit so close and touch another's hair. Those were all lessons that had taken forever for him to understand, and often had him in a screaming match (or fisticuffs) with adults. Then they became a safety net. As soon as he realized that there were predefined ways to act, scripts that he could follow, life became a little easier. Rules back in their world kept Liu Qingge safe and helped him live somewhat functionally. But those same rules held him back.

They kept him from reaching out and taking his shixiong's hand.

Here…

Could he do that here?

His fingers twitched.

"Right," Shen Yuan said, understanding now with a smile. "That means you can do more of what you want here." He raised an eyebrow, the corner of his lip curling into a teasing tilt. "And what does Mingbo want?"

You, Liu Qingge almost said it. The shape of the word was one his tongue.

"More dessert?" Shen Yuan asked, his smile growing and his eyes squishing into little half-moons. "More of Binghe's cooking that makes you smile?"

"You're teasing me," Liu Qingge accused and glared. The glare was to stop himself from grinning.

Apparently it didn't work.

"You're beautiful," Shen Yuan told him with a laugh. Then he paused, realizing what he said. "Your smile is pretty." His skin turned a brilliant shade of red. "H-Handsome! Very manly. Your smile is-"

Liu Qingge laughed. His heartbeat danced on his eardrums. He wanted to kiss him. If he didn't turn away, he *would* kiss him. "Thanks, Yuan."

Wonder softened Shen Yuan's expression. The corner of his lips tugged into an adoring smile. (Did he know he was doing that?) "Um. Yeah. Sure." His eyes dropped into his lap. "Sorry."

"Apologize again," Liu Qingge said, and flashed him a sharp look. *I dare you.*

Shen Yuan gave him a challenging look from underneath his lashes. It looked as if he might really dare.

Breath shortening, Liu Qingge started to think of what he might do when he did.

Shut him up with a kiss?

He wanted to taste him.

A loud laugh caught both of their attention, and they spotted Luo Binghe holding far too many samples in his arms. An older man was clapping him on the back. Despite the bright smile on Luo Binghe's lips, there was a slight strain in his eyes. He was uncomfortable with wherever that conversation had gone.

Shen Yuan was starting to rise up, noticing the situation as well.

"I got him," Liu Qingge promised. He stopped Shen Yuan from getting up, and briskly walked over. In a short amount of time, he killed the conversation, rescued the little brat, and brought him back into the safe clutches of his shizun.

Liu Qingge was rather adept at that – ending conversations.

In quiet stupefaction, Luo Binghe didn't say a single word even as they all sat down on the bench.

There was no question that the brat could have handled himself. It was a matter of whether or not he *had* to. Not with Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge there to help him out. *You're not alone,* Liu Qingge wanted to tell him. Instead he had to show him. Because words were hard, but actions were clearer. Sometimes.

"Well?" Liu Qingge prompted, crossing his arms as he eyed the food. "What do you want me to try?"

Luo Binghe's face glowed with a smile. "Ming-gege!" His eyes looked dangerously close to tears that he quickly blinked away. He procured some pieces of fruit covered something that looked akin to melted sugar. "This one first!"

Later, Liu Qingge might regret encouraging this behavior. At the moment he couldn't find it in himself to even try. Not with both Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe sharing eager smiles, waiting on his reaction to all the different types of food.

He didn't *think* he was making any particular expressions, but after one specific savory steamed bun, Shen Yuan said, "I quite like those, too."

Excited, Luo Binghe said, "I can make those for both Yuan-gege and Ming-gege later!"

Yeah. He didn’t regret it. Not one bit.

Chapter End Notes

We're almost getting to a point where I can get you guys a chapter count. The problem is that I am also extremely excited for the current chapters I am writing on, and... you guys still have about 10 ish chapters until you get there...

On another note, I've started working on another SVSSS AU as well? It will also be LBH x LQG x SY - though you might not see it until I'm completely finished writing this one. But I am really excited for it!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Almost 5k, which is about 21ish minutes to read.

As a gentle warning, there's a cliffhanger. Things are beginning to pick up, so there are going to be a few more cliffhangers in the upcoming chapters.

CW: Chronic pain, negative thoughts, slight manipulation(?), the Luo Binghe special

What seemed like hundreds of options stretched down a long road. Each store had its own signature lighting and smell, with mannequins lined up at the windows wearing fashion unique to Shen Yuan's world. The clothes were a lot more daring than their own world. (At least, in the human realm.) It really was a wonder that his shizun was so well adjusted to the heavy swaths of robes, considering that he was used to wearing much less. Presumably, that is. Luo Binghe eyed his shizun subtly, and drew his eyes down the length of his body.

Short hair, small stature, large sweater with a shirt underneath, and jeans with holes. (Try as he might, Luo Binghe did not understand the holes. He itched to patch them, or find his shizun alternative pants that were not ruined.) He supposed in comparison to others of this world, his shizun dressed modestly. Unless one counted what he wore the previous night. Just Luo Binghe's shirt and a small pair of shorts.

(Or boxers as his shizun had taught them – he had stuttered adorably as he did.)

Was Luo Binghe ever going to forget what his shizun looked like wearing one of his things and nearly nothing else?

Absolutely not.

His wrist would not forgive him later.

In between wandering between vendors and feeding his shishu food, Luo Binghe made himself a student of fashion. There seemed to be very distinct clothing styles between genders, and so he quickly focused mainly on the men. In most cases their outfits were boring. Clingy tops and pants. Nothing like the extravagance of layered robes, paired with intricate hairstyles.

It did not take much time before he grew confident with this world's fashion. The three of them entered their first store. After collecting sizes and instructions, Luo Binghe began. There was a boggling amount of choices; dozens of colors and dyes. It was almost overwhelming. When he held up a pair of pants and tested them in his hands, Shen Yuan suggested, "You should try those on."

There was probably a private area for him to change. That assumption was easy to make, but it was more fun to turn to his shizun with large eyes and demurely murmur, "Shizun wants me to change right here?" with an innocent blink.

The way his shizun's face colored so swiftly was enchanting. Shen Yuan explained, courageously without a stutter, "There's… changing rooms. Here. You can try on different clothes. It's probably a good idea for both of you, because even if things have sizes they're not accurate."

Liu Qingge's face pinched.

"It's all very private!" Shen Yuan continued, "You get your own room, and we can grab you different sizes-" He rambled on.

Feeling the texture of the pants between his fingers, Luo Binghe carefully observed his shishu. He watched him shift from one foot to the other, hands clenching and unclenching. This man was the war god, even in a completely different world, and he had as much interest in clothes as he did in the logistics of An Ding Peak. Mouth curling, Luo Binghe turned his attention to his shizun and leaned in, "Yuan-gege?" he interrupted gently.

Shen Yuan blinked up at him, skin still flushed alluringly. "Yes, Binghe?"

"How about we just grab some things that interest us for now and try them on later?" Luo Binghe asked. "Especially because we still have to go get food…"

Liu Qingge stopped twitching as much.

"Oh, I suppose we could," Shen Yuan said, thoughtfully. "If you would prefer. And it'd be more private at our place. We can return anything you guys don't like."

"Mn," Luo Binghe agreed, smiling warmly. "Shishu, what do you think of this?" He offered the material to the war god.

With a raised eyebrow, Liu Qingge rubbed the fabric. His hand snatched away rather quickly, and he gruffly said, "No."

The three of them wandered about the store, with Luo Binghe offering different textures to his shishu to see which were alright and what ones were rejected. By the time they made their way around the entire store, Luo Binghe had a solid idea on what clothes to seek out.

They ended up with a decent amount of what Shen Yuan referred to as, "lounge wear" as well as some outfits they could wear out and about. The price at the end seemed… large. His shizun hardly even gave it a second thought. Then it was on to the next store.

At first, both Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan diligently followed him from one store to the next. Then both started to lag. One was antsy and started to get a bit snippy whenever Luo Binghe asked his opinion, and the other leaned against the wall or heavily on his cane whenever he thought the other two weren't looking. It did not take much convincing to get his shizun and shishu to go take a break. Both gave him free reign and found something else to occupy their time – something about tea. The day passed on in a blur of fabric and color. There were a luxurious amount of choices. More than once he paused by a few articles of clothing and wished he knew his shizun's size.

In the end, he was forced to guess and limited himself to only a *few* things for his shizun. Each suited him far too well to be able to just leave them behind.

Luo Binghe left the last store with barely enough space on his arms to house all the bags. He found his shizun and shishu sitting with three cups on the table. His breath caught and his lungs seized, goosebumps crawling up the back of his neck. The two were locked in a conversation. There was a coy tilt to Liu Qingge's lips. His perfect posture was ruined by his slight lean towards Shen Yuan, with his elbow on the table. They sat next to another, their knees shy of bumping.

Shizun had both hands wrapped around a cup, body magnetized close to Liu Qingge. He was shy, head bent with his shoulders tucked up near his ears. Despite the demeanor, he had a teasing glimmer in his eyes.

Liu Qingge laughed. There was half a second of hesitation, then he shoved his leg against Shen Yuan's to jostle him. He did not move his leg away after.

Each passing second, they drew closer.

Heat burned in Luo Binghe. He was caught. An unknown feeling, akin to bubbles, stirred around in his stomach. It wasn't unpleasant. No, quite the opposite. It was a building, stirring tension that ached for release.

The kiss he shared with Shizun was brief and too swift to be anything but a passing dream. Were his lips soft? Would he taste like the drink in his hands?

And Liu Qingge… would he be stiff, at first? Unrelenting? He imagined the kiss. Not quite resisting, but closed off. Then, like when Luo Binghe touched him, he would slowly relax into it. Would he take charge?

The two of them were so close. Liu Qingge's eyes dropped to his shixiong's lips.

Luo Binghe's heart played like drums in his ears. Each beat reverberated in the tips of his fingers. *Do it,* he begged. *Kiss him.*

Shen Yuan watched his shidi through a fan of dark eyelashes. A pink blush settled over his cheeks. His lips parted. He licked his lips. Every single piece of his body language was an invitation. Did he realize he was doing that?

His shishu's fingers trailed across the tabletop, drifting closer to Shen Yuan. The shells of his ears were red.

Then Shen Yuan's eyes drifted over his shidi's shoulder and caught Luo Binghe. His back straightened, and a wide smile lit up his face.

It was heartwarming, and also aggravating.

So close!

The two pulled apart and turned towards him. Shen Yuan eagerly motioned for Luo Binghe to join. As he drifted closer, his shishu pulled out an extra chair for all the bags and organized them. Someone shoved a clear cup into Luo Binghe's hands, and by the time he sat down, all the tension between both his shizun and shishu had melted away completely.

"How much did you spend?" Liu Qingge asked, eying all the bags. He peeked through one of the ones closest to him with a raised eyebrow.

"It doesn't matter," Shen Yuan said, wiping a hand through the air. "You did a lot! Good. Hopefully now the two of you can be more comfortable."

"We will be!" Luo Binghe said, smiling brightly. "When we get back, I would appreciate Shizun's opinion on my choices."

Expression softening, Shen Yuan reached over and patted his head. "Of course, Binghe. But knowing you, you chose well."

It did not appear to matter how old he was, praise from his shizun never seemed to lose its effect on him. His back straightened reflexively and dislodged the hand on his head.

Across the table, Liu Qingge smirked. He leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. "Try it." He pointed at the drink.

Obediently, Luo Binghe lifted the cup. There was a tube sticking out of the top. Using the power of common sense, he wrapped his lips around the tube and sucked. It was some sort of tea, milky and full of spice and sugar. His eyes widened. "That's good!"

"Too sweet," Liu Qingge said with a shake of his head.

Shen Yuan hid a smile behind a sip. "Mingbo keeps saying that, but he smiles whenever he takes a drink."

"I do *not,"* his shishu said, throwing an irritated glance at Shen Yuan. He shoved his leg against him again, which caused his shizun to catch suppressed laughter in his hand.

"Does Ming-gege have a secret weakness for sweets?" Luo Binghe asked, setting his chin on his hand.

Liu Qingge threw him a cutting look. "No!" he denied, and he shoved his foot against Luo Binghe's knee.

At the same time, Shen Yuan slyly said, “We can’t be so sure, Binghe… We might need more research.”

“This Binghe will study and offer a second opinion,” Luo Binghe said with a studious nod. Both of them turned to Liu Qingge and motioned for him to take a sip.

“*Stop,”* Liu Qingge grumbled, and he glowered at the offending drinks.

“Try it again, Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe teased. He grinned.

“Remember, Mingbo?” Shen Yuan asked, he reached across the table and placed his hand on his shidi’s wrist. “Different rules.”

The glower lifted, the way fog rises underneath the heat of the sun. Liu Qingge relaxed. “Different rules,” he echoed. After a moment, his eyebrows sank together. He was too embarrassed to take a drink now, not with all the attention. “Food next?”

“Yes!” Luo Binghe said eagerly.

With a thoughtful hum, Shen Yuan leaned back in his chair. Both of his hands returned to his cup, and his head tilted back as he considered. His expression was neutral. “If you guys wanted to change into fresh clothes, we could do that. We’ll find a public restroom, and then make our way to the grocery store.” Exhaustion ate away at the edges of his words. Despite his best efforts, his shoulders slumped and his face was pale.

Jaw tight, Luo Binghe exchanged a glance with his shishu. “I should wash the clothes before we wear them,” he said aloud. “How about we save food for tomorrow?”

“Binghe. You wanted to cook,” Shen Yuan said. He raised an eyebrow at him. “We don’t have anything in the kitchen.”

“I saw some food that I wanted to try on your phone!” Luo Binghe said brightly. While he was eager to feed both of the men at the table, he also wanted to make certain that his shizun didn’t strain himself. It was somewhat concerning that the three of them had only been out for about a quarter of the day and his shizun already appeared so haggard.

A quiet pang of worry hooked into his chest. What exactly was wrong with his shizun’s health here?

“No,” Shen Yuan said and shook his head. “Let’s go to the grocery store. We’re already out.”

“...and we can go out again,” Liu Qingge answered. “At another time.”

Shen Yuan opened his mouth, and then closed it. He frowned.

Amusement tickled the back of Luo Binghe’s throat. He suppressed the urge to laugh by taking a drink. He had lived with that man for a few years and knew his preferential habits. More often than not, if his shizun had the choice, he would rather lounge around and read a book. Of course the idea of “going out” seemed like such a monumental task. In that same

vein, his shishu always seemed to spend more time outside of his own house than he ever did in it.

Liu Qingge gave Luo Binghe an aggrieved glance.

They both came to the same conclusion: Shen Yuan would not back down. They would just have to rush their shopping trip.

“Give me some fucking pants,” his shishu said with a sigh. He started to sort through some of the clothes.

“Hold on!” Luo Binghe set his drink aside and plunged into the bags. After he found the outfit he was looking for, he placed it into its own separate bag and held it out. A smile filled his lips. “Shishu should change into this!”

Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. Defiance lit the darks of his eyes. “Importunate,” he said, though the corner of his lip was tugging up.

As an experiment, Luo Binghe let his smile fall from his eyes. His lips tightened, subtly strained. “If Ming-gege doesn’t-“

“It’s fine,” Liu Qingge said, hastily. He snatched the bag to prevent it from being taken away. “You did well.” Reaching across the table, he landed a stiff hand atop Luo Binghe’s head.

Warmth swelled in his chest, and Luo Binghe had to dip his head to hide his smile.

His shishu motioned towards a sign and said, “Bathrooms. Right?”

Surprised, Shen Yuan twisted in his seat to look. “Yes. Do you need help?”

There was a long silence.

The war god stared flatly at Shen Yuan, with a single eyebrow raised.

Shizun blushed. “Not… with changing! Just navigating the bathrooms.”

“I’ll figure it out.” Liu Qingge spoke with a deadpan, ruined only when his lips twitched. It appeared he had fun teasing Shizun as well. He held up the bag, nodded to the two of them as a goodbye, and swept off to the bathrooms.

Smiling to himself, Luo Binghe slid his chair close to his shizun. He aimed a little close, and jostled him. There was a slight annoyed huff, and a hand reached over to pat his shoulder. It wasn’t as great as a head pat, but it was a close second. “You’re not going to change?” Shen Yuan asked.

“No. These clothes are more generous than what was given to Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe said, and he flashed him a flirtatious smile. “Unless Yuan-gege is offering to help me.”

Groaning, Shen Yuan covered his face with his hands. “I didn’t mean it like that!”

I did, Luo Binghe thought with an inward sigh. He pulled one foot up to the chair and folded his leg. “Shizun,” he murmured, hugging his knee to his chest.

“Mn?” Shen Yuan peeled his hands away from his face to give Luo Binghe his full attention.

“It’s nice here,” he said, voice low and slow. He rested his chin on his knee. It was hard to beat the habitual need to be formal and respectful, especially to his shizun.

“It’s… alright,” Shen Yuan said with a wince that said he disagreed. He reached over and patted Luo Binghe’s head, his eyes warm. “This master is glad Binghe likes it here.”

Warmth cascaded through Luo Binghe’s body, and he melted. He nearly let himself collapse into his shizun’s lap, and forced himself to stay upright. “This disciple missed you,” he murmured, his throat tight. His eyes watered despite his best effort.

An embarrassed smile tugged at Shen Yuan’s lips. He shrank again, as he usually did without a fan to hide behind. With a soft sigh, he rubbed the top of Luo Binghe’s hat. “This master missed Binghe, too.”

Reaching up, Luo Binghe tugged off his hat. He shamelessly offered his head, to which Shen Yuan tutted while he hid the pleased curve of his lips. Fingers worked their way through his curls, and he was at peace. Every second they spent in this world, he wondered again *why* they needed to return at all. There were no realms to conquer. No Xin Mo. No sects to run from. Just the three of them. The world was so soft here. It was a delicate dream.

Shouting broke the mood. Luo Binghe sat up and turned towards the source. Unfortunately, it came from the bathrooms. Shen Yuan paused, and scrutinized the commotion.

“I’ll make sure Ming-gege is alright,” Luo Binghe said. He put back on the hat, and hopped off the chair. There was a quiet sound from Shen Yuan, but no further word of protest. Whatever he had wanted to say didn’t seem that important, so Luo Binghe continued on.

Two shapes became people and their faces grew clearer. Neither were the war god. They were some kids rough housing and shoving each other into the wall. When Luo Binghe drew near, they stopped and gave him a wide-eyed glance. He ignored them and stepped into the men’s restroom.

Within, in front of the mirror, Liu Qingge leaned over a sink and washed his face. Even if his form was somewhat blurry from this distance, Luo Binghe felt a rather smug sense of satisfaction. His shishu looked *good* in his new outfit. He wore looser, more comfortable jeans and a jacket over a light sweatshirt. It wasn’t anywhere near as form fitting as his last clothes, but he still cut a dashing figure.

Straightening, Liu Qingge shifted part of his awareness to Luo Binghe. He raised an eyebrow in lieu of a greeting, and used a paper towel to dry his face.

“Ming-gege is handsome,” Luo Binghe said. The daring compliment sent a little flash of anxiety through him. His heart clenched. It was easy to ignore. Mostly.

A pleased smile poked at the corner of Liu Qingge's lips. It vanished quickly. "Binghe chose well." He nodded his approval, and turned towards him.

Instead of heading back out and leading them back to Shen Yuan, Luo Binghe stepped further into the bathroom. There was no one else around. The place was kept decently clean, and had the faint odor of some sort of plastic perfume. It wasn't the most romantic of places, but there weren't a lot of options for Luo Binghe to find his shishu alone. He stopped in front of him with his hands resting in his jacket pockets. He asked, "Why haven't you told him?"

In a second, the warmth on Liu Qingge's face vanished. The muscles in his jaw twitched. "What?"

There wasn't any way that Liu Qingge did not understand him. Luo Binghe planned to let the question sit until his shishu gave in and answered. Unfortunately, the sharp switch between the tenderness of Liu Qingge's expression and the coldness he exhibited now was too close to the jarring switch in his shizun right before he was pushed into the Abyss. Fear sprouted uncertainties in his mind, and his mouth ran free, "I don't understand. You're the War God of Bai Zhan. You fight everyday; you fight *everything.* You fought for your position. Why don't you fight for *him?"*

Shocked, Liu Qingge stiffened. His eyes widened. Seconds later, his face blossomed into an embarrassed hue. He glared, ready to bare his teeth.

"You love him!"

That was the last cord, apparently. Liu Qingge caught his collar and swung him around to slam him against the wall. "Y-You-" he choked. His face was red, and his eyes wide. "Shut up!"

"I'm not…" Luo Binghe said with a sigh. His back smarted. The bad thing about this world was the lack of cultivation. He *was* weaker here. "This Binghe *doesn't* understand. That's all, Liu-shishu. *Please.* This lowly one is not trying to make light of your feelings."

"Feelings?!" Liu Qingge shouted through his teeth. "Who has feelings?!!"

"*Shishu…"* Luo Binghe sighed. This was probably a mistake, especially if he couldn't even get Liu Qingge to admit he had *feelings.* He had pushed too far — gotten too impatient and greedy. Though he had been almost *certain* the two might have kissed earlier… several times, actually. If not for that stupid old man and his crass language about men loving men…

If not for Shen Yuan spotting him.

With a frustrated curse, Liu Qingge let go and stalked away. He glared at Luo Binghe, prowling back and forth like a threatened animal. His fists tightened at his sides. "Why haven't *you* done anything?!"

"It's not like I haven't *tried,"* Luo Binghe muttered. He reached up and straightened his collar, shaking his head. Grievously, he had been too young in his shizun's eyes. And now… well. "Shizun is…" He struggled to find a delicate term.

Hackles slowly lowering, Liu Qingge grumbled, “Oblivious.”

“Yes.” Luo Binghe frowned at his feet.

Now that the topic wasn’t entirely on Liu Qingge, he started to calm down. He still looked distinctly uncomfortable. His blush stained his skin. He frowned at Luo Binghe, looking bullied and slightly betrayed.

If Luo Binghe were playing this smart, he would let this conversation die here. But there was an opening. He lifted his eyes and caught his shishu’s. They stared at another, seconds drawing out with every thunderous heart beat. Luo Binghe used to think he would do anything to be by his shizun’s side. The darkest parts of him, obsessive jealousy, played with the idea of chasing all others away. It would be just himself and his shizun in their own world. When he was younger, he used to pretend as much when it was just the two of them in the bamboo house.

Except Luo Binghe had known, even then, that his shizun would wilt if he were locked away. He built connections the way a spider wove together a web. It was a subtle thing that one might only see at the right angle. People had a habit of accidentally running into it, and were unable to escape the charm that was Shen Yuan at the center. He was most beautiful surrounded by those who cared for him.

When his shizun got poisoned by Without a Cure, that *brute* started dropping by regularly. Even then, it was more than obvious to see the attraction between the two men.

The idea Luo Binghe would have to *share* his shizun with someone else used to send him into quiet heartbreaks and rage that he tried to pack away and hide from his shizun. Liu Qingge had received a lot of his jealous ire. It had upset him that his shizun had to depend on someone else, especially someone as brutish and rough and *inane* as that man.

That was until Luo Binghe actually *saw* Liu Qingge.

There was a quiet elegance to his shishu. Every single movement was not so much calculated as habitually woven into his soul. Hours upon hours of rigorous training had created an inexplicable control over every movement. Even when he moved with abrupt rage, he was more akin to the ferocity of a controlled storm. He was the wind; sharp and ruthless, sweeping across the landscape. He was heavy rain clouds that shielded all that stood behind him. He was the crack of thunder whose stirring melody shook the world.

He was a storm that had left its mark.

Oblivious, Liu Qingge had said.

With his heart in his throat, Luo Binghe said, “He isn’t the only one.”

Liu Qingge startled.

What Luo Binghe felt for his shishu – it wasn’t *love.* Not in the way he saw Shen Yuan. But it was a possibility; a road he wouldn’t mind exploring hand in hand with his shizun. There

were so many hidden depths to Liu Qingge, with harsh edges and intricate knots that Luo Binghe ached to untangle.

He wanted to have the chance to.

Lips parting, Liu Qingge took half a step back.

That step pierced a lung. Pain sprouted like a vicious weed. It was a hollow and devastating ache. Luo Binghe's hands twitched at his sides.

Greedy.

His mouth dried.

Insatiable.

Luo Binghe had known–

Unwanted.

–they had only just started getting to know another. It's only truly been two days–

Beast.

Luo Binghe had a fickle heart. It chose who he let in. Though as soon as it decided, as soon as he *knew,* it opened and wept and *bled* for that person–

Importunate.

–and it used to only be *one.* Just one impossible thing he could not have because he was a–

Demon.

Unwanted. An orphan. Jealous. Not *enough.* Never enough. Selfish and greedy, always wanting more than he could take. It was too soon. It had been far too soon. Luo Binghe should have waited. He should have played different cards–

Would it *ever* have been enough?

No.

This always would have been the result.

Rejection.

"Binghe," Liu Qingge stirred. He took half a step forward.

It was too late. Whatever consolation his shishu wanted to offer – it wasn't what Luo Binghe wanted. It was a consoling pat for the heart of a broken child, not something for a man who was desperate to be loved. "We should check on Shizun," Luo Binghe said, and he wrapped every broken piece of himself up. Like throwing a bandage around a limb without setting the

bone. He wrenched that bandage tight and let it *hurt.* “This Binghe is glad Liu-shishu finds the clothes adequate.”

“Binghe.” Liu Qingge took another step forward, his face twisting with uncertainty and concern. “I-”

“*We need to check on him!”* Luo Binghe interrupted. He hated how his eyes burned and how the bathroom faded behind globs of tears. How would he explain this to his shizun? He took in gulping gasps, attempting to force emotions back down.

Outside, distantly, they heard a commotion. Someone screamed.

Luo Binghe lurched towards the bathroom entry.

A hand caught his forearm, and wrenched him around.

“Luo. Binghe.” Liu Qingge spoke through his teeth. His face was red.

There was a mole underneath his eye. Luo Binghe had thought about kissing it before.

“What?” Liu Qingge searched his face, looking for something. He caught Luo Binghe’s other arm and held him so tightly it ached and grounded him. “*What!?”*

“Shizun-”

“Shut the *fuck* up!” Liu Qingge shouted. “What the *fuck* do you *mean? Explain!”*

Anger lit his insides. A thousand ways to be cruel popped up like helpful suggestions. Except.

Luo Binghe couldn’t do that.

He had hurt his shizun because he could not have him, and he refused to do that again *here,* when it was his shishu who did not want him. It was not their fault that he was what he was. It was his own fault. Taking in a slow and shaky breath, Luo Binghe reached up and ripped off the hands that held him. “You already know, so why are you asking?”

“Someone call an ambulance!” A voice screamed.

Something was *wrong.* Luo Binghe turned to run out the door. There was a familiar sweeping sensation.

Shizun.

Someone screamed about blood.

Before his foot hit the ground, the world turned dark.

Awareness slid to him piece by piece. It was sluggish. He became aware of his body first. The aftereffects of the qi deviation burned through his abused meridians. He felt tender and weak. There was something else. A poison. His own body fought against it. Heat lay over his skin like a wet blanket, with flashes of cold. It muddled his thoughts.

Luo Binghe tried to grasp onto his consciousness. There was the sharp smell of herbs, and the cleanliness of what could only be Qian Cao Peak. Voices.

"Why isn't he waking!?"

Someone protectively stood beside him, cool fingers pressed to the inside of his wrist. Qi slid through him, and soothed the turmoil of the poison.

"Liu-shixiong, please. Calm down."

It was Liu Qingge? Yes. It was Shishu. Anger sharpened his shishu's words, the meaning behind them was lost on his poisoned mind. Voices shot back and forth as darkness blurred the definition of consciousness. When Luo Binghe awakened again, a hand held his cheek and a thumb traced over his brow.

His body knew that touch. It was his shizun.

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu murmured. "He's burning up, Mu-shidi."

"Thank you, Shen-shixiong. I am aware."

"Then *do* something about it!" Liu Qingge snapped.

Mu Qingfang sighed. "Alright. Liu-shixiong, I need a moment to speak with Shen-shixiong, please."

There was some grumbling and more arguing. Finally, after what seemed like hours, a shuffle of movement. A door slammed shut. A flash of qi swept through the room. "Well. I suspect we don't have that much time, Shen-shixiong."

"What's going on?" Shen Qingqiu asked, voice level and cool. His fingers twitched on Luo Binghe's face, the only betrayal of his nerves.

Mu Qingfang took in a sharp breath. His voice was tight from fatigue. Even the slight irritation in his tone was subdued by how *exhausted* he was. That did not make his question any less horrifying.

"How long have you known your disciple is a demon?"

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

3.9k words, 19 ish minutes reading time.

Another slight cliff hanger for this chapter. Forgive me (teehehe)

No content warnings for this chapter that I can identify!

Shen Qingqiu needed ten business days to process the past three days, *please.* Events kept happening and they would not stop or give him a single breath of peace. What the fuck? Mu Qingfang stood on the other side of the room, skin pale from lack of sleep and proper care. He stood with his hands folded behind his back, and his shoulders slumped from heavy drain. His shidi had a subtle handsomeness to him. It was one that grew like the beginning of a rising sun, its beauty only strengthened the longer you basked in its presence.

That beauty was only mildly damped now that he had a stern, aggravated expression. His eyes narrowed on Shen Qingqiu as if he had trampled on all of his precious medicinal herbs. “Shen-shixiong. Please answer the question.”

A sharp breath cut into Shen Qingqiu’s lungs. At first when Mu Qingfang had bullied the war god from the room, Shen Qingqiu had suspected some bad news about Without a Cure or *anything* else. He never expected that the man had figured out what Luo Binghe was. How could he not have expected this? The three of them were unconscious. How would Luo Binghe conceal his demonic qi if he was *unconscious?!*

Plus with the System gone to shit, did that mean that Luo Binghe did not have the protagonist’s safety halo!?

He stood next to his disciple and began to plan their escape off the mountain. There had to be some places within the demon realm that the two of them could hide, at least until the System repaired itself. The text box did not look any better than before, and now there was an annoying constant tone grinding in his ears. He straightened and stared the doctor down. He had to be ready to face his shidi and get Luo Binghe somewhere safe.

At the moment, Mu Qingfang stood next to the privacy talisman that he had placed, ready to be torn down at any moment. Right on the other side of that door, Liu Qingge waited. If Mu Qingfang called out for the war god and told him the truth… it would be over. There was no

way that Shen Qingqiu could win a fight against Liu Qingge. Not alone. And, for some reason, Luo Binghe wasn't waking up. Was he poisoned? What the fuck!?

They needed Xin Mo.

Where was that cursed sword?

"Was he behind the Immortal Conference?" Mu Qingfang asked, voice tight. There was a deadly flash in his eyes.

For the first time since Shen Qingqiu met the doctor, he felt fear. The man had never been overtly powerful or dangerous, yet right now Shen Qingqiu felt as if one wrong word would forfeit his life. "No!"

Mu Qingfang studied him, each passing second accentuated with the long pause.

Jaw tight, Shen Qingqiu stepped between the doctor and his disciple. "Luo Binghe had *nothing* to do with the Immortal Conference, and nothing to do with the demonic invasion. I doubt he even knew he was a demon at that time."

"Oh?" Mu Qingfang raised an eyebrow. "But you did?"

Shen Qingqiu couldn't stop his startled breath.

"I suppose that it would have been a good excuse to explain your behavior towards the boy in the beginning," Mu Qingfang said, absently.

Would have been…? Shen Qingqiu did not know what to say in response to that. His eyebrows pressed together in confusion.

"A disciple found the three of you in your Bamboo House. It appeared as if there had been some type of altercation. I had thought Liu-shixiong had found out, though his apparent concern for the boy seems to say otherwise." Mu Qingfang relayed this information with a guarded expression. His shoulders were tense and his eyes were piercing.

"...no," Shen Qingqiu said, slowly. "Liu-shidi does not know." After another awkward pause, he added, "Binghe isn't a spy, Mu-shidi. He is just a boy."

"Hm."

Drawing his shoulders back, Shen Qingqiu hardened his expression and pulled on the full force of his station. "Mu-shidi, Luo Binghe has been nothing but a dedicated student and an asset to this sect. *Just* because he is a demon does not mean that he is evil! Demons, like humans, have the capacity to be good."

Mu Qingfang seemed to be waiting for something. When nothing happened, his eyebrows rose. "You seem to truly believe that."

Confused, Shen Qingqiu lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes. He hated that he was still without a fan. "I do. Binghe is *good,* Mu-shidi."

Tentatively, Mu Qingfang drew away from the door. He paced, rubbing a hand over his chin. His lips pulled into a tight, thin line. “The three of you were… *gone.* There is no better way of describing it. I did extensive testing.” It went without saying that he hadn’t slept since the three of them had been discovered in the Bamboo House. “Your breathing was steady, but you were not sleeping. Nothing could wake you. But there was something binding the three of you – some strange type of energy. We decided it best to place the three of you close, and to supplement it.” His eyes flickered towards Shen Qingqiu. “There were a few times you awoke.”

Shock spilled through Shen Qingqiu. He straightened. “I did?” At some point, his hand had started to thread through Luo Binghe’s hair. It was soothing some anxious piece of him. Fuck. What if as Shen Qingqiu, he was murmuring and having conversations as *Shen Yuan?*

“Yes,” Mu Qingfang said, slowly. He was eying him again, as if waiting for something. “Only through extensive testing, was I able to locate what I think is the curse. When the energy fluctuated and was at its weakest was when you returned.” His lips pursed. “You were the only one having a reaction. That, and many other troubling factors, led me to the conclusion that the three of you aren’t simply losing consciousness.”

Because it seemed as if he was waiting for an answer, Shen Qingqiu nodded.

“And Shen-shixiong did not think to mention this when he first woke from this curse?” Mu Qingfang asked, anger breaking the pleasant facade of his bedside manner. His hands curled into shaking fists.

“I…” Shen Qingqiu started, his throat closing. He bowed his head. “This one apologizes.”

“I suppose,” Mu Qingfang said, voice hot with frustration, “it might have been difficult for you to explain.”

Shen Qingqiu raised his eyebrows.

“That a curse is bringing you, your disciple, and now your shidi back to the realm you came from.”

The very world dropped from underneath Shen Qingqiu’s feet.

“Though, that would mean that it is not a curse, is it, Shen-shixiong?” Mu Qingfang said. “Whatever is binding you here appears to be having some difficulties.”

A loud shriek cracked across Shen Qingqiu’s skull, the System screaming garbage at him. His heart raced. He started to respond, to deny it.

“Ah, I would be very careful here, Shen-shixiong,” Mu Qingfang continued, “on what you are planning to say. I would take stock of your person, mainly what you will find around your neck.”

Startled, Shen Qingqiu’s hands flew to the collar of his robes. He pulled out an amulet on a loose string of leather. It was an ugly thing, like someone found a discarded piece of

woodcarving and thought to make it into a piece of jewelry. He tried to raise it above his head, and could not by any force of will lift it above his chin. The muscles in his arms started to seize and tremble.

“The one who bestowed the amulet on you is the one who needs to take it off,” Mu Qingfang explained, voice bland. “I am not certain if you have heard of it. It’s the Honorous Snare of the Spectre.” He waited, to see if his shixiong had any knowledge of it.

To his own bafflement, Shen Qingqiu had *not.* Such a thing had not come up within the original book. What was this!? He shook his head, too afraid to speak.

Mu Qingfang relaxed slightly. His eyebrow raised. “I see. Well. I suppose what is most pertinent to you is the fact that every time you say something that you *believe* is a lie, the leather cord around the amulet will begin to shrink. It will only stop and revert back to its original size once you speak the truth. Fail to do so, and you will lose your head.”

Wait.

There *was* a plant that worked similarly – the Seeking Spectre of True Light. What looked like a forest was actually just one massive organism. All the trees had connecting roots and had the ability to trap all manner of creatures within. It was featured in an extremely intriguing side-plot – potential wife candidate number 348 had managed to influence Xin Mo with a wayward explosion of energy and instead of Luo Binghe teleporting back to his intended home, he was thrown into the middle of the Seeking Spectre of True Light. He, of course, had managed to bring Potential Wife 348 with him.

The two had started off at odds, fighting another, and found themselves ensnared in a tangle of tree limbs. Eventually both realized that every time they were honest with another, the trees loosened their hold.

It, of course, ended in strange tree bondage papapa…

But afterwards there had been so many ancient buildings and ruins that the two came across! Long forgotten sects with unique techniques! The possibilities were endless.

Even with the cool worldbuilding to sate him for the entire arc Shen Qingqiu found himself irritated. Why didn’t Luo Binghe just use Xin Mo to teleport back out!?

Stupid hack author!

Mu Qingfang reacted to his silence with a raised eyebrow. “Believe it or not, but I do not intend for it to behead either of my shixiongs.”

Either. Right. Even though his shidi had figured out the truth, he still referred to Shen Qingqiu – *Shen Yuan* – as a martial brother.

“Do you intend to harm the sect?” Mu Qingfang asked.

“No!” Shen Yuan said, aghast. “I never intended to hurt anyone.”

Mu Qingfang nodded, as if it were the results of a test that he had already predicted. “Did you have a choice when you took over?”

“No…” Jaw tight, Shen Yuan glanced over towards the broken dialogue box. It flickered red, and there was an annoying broken beep. “Mu-shidi,” he said, and swallowed, “Master Mu. This one does not know how much of this he is able to talk about.”

Expression falling away from its hardened distrust, Mu Qingfang nodded. “Understood. I suspected. This shidi apologizes for putting Shen-shixiong in a precarious situation.”

“...Master Mu,” Shen Yuan said, tight throat clinging onto the words. His eyes dropped. An apology sat on his tongue. He had always felt guilty for lying and stepping into a role that he had not earned. But there was never any way for him to fix it. So, he ignored those feelings. He shut them all away. Now they leaked out.

“Shen-shixiong,” the doctor said, pointedly, “I can pinpoint the exact moment where it was *you* and not *him.”* His expression softened. “It’s been years. I would like to think the two of us have at least become friends. You have more than proven your worth as my *shixiong.* Understood?”

With a building lump in his throat, Shen Yuan nodded. He realized with a start that at some point Luo Binghe was *holding* his hand. When had that happened? When he glanced over at his disciple, he appeared knocked out cold. He would have believed it — if not for the comforting grip on his fingers.

The doctor sighed. “Again, I apologize for the extremes of this situation. I just… needed to be sure. Your disciple will wake up soon enough. If not, I can administer something to help. I simply wanted to be certain that the sect wasn’t in danger. From either of you.” He glanced up worriedly at Shen Yuan. “You had nothing to do with the sowers?”

“No,” Shen Yuan said. “Of course not.”

Bit by bit, Mu Qingfang began to relax. His expression dissolved into a light smile and he said, “Of course. Shen-shixiong, forgive me. Let me take that amulet off, and let us discuss Disciple Luo-”

The privacy talisman on the door burned off.

Shen Qingqiu barely had enough time to stuff the amulet back into his robes before the door flew open.

On the other side, the sect leader stood with Liu Qingge draped in his arms. Tight breaths shuttered from the war god’s lips. He was a powerful man; always pristine and in control. Now he looked broken. His skin was ashen, blood drained from his nose, eyes, and lips. Yue Qingyuan wore a hardened expression and he threw a tight look across the room. “Please excuse the interruption-”

“Qingge!” Shen Qingqiu cried. He ripped away from the bed to rush across the room. To his shock, Luo Binghe was with him. Both crowded around the entryway.

Yue Qingyuan's face twisted as he tried to restrain his bafflement.

Without anyone's permission, Luo Binghe stole his shishu from the sect leader's arms. The war god grunted, head rolling against his shoulder. Blood smeared over their light medical robes. Luo Binghe walked across the room and gently set his shishu down onto one of the beds.

Shen Qingqiu was at his side, hands fluttering nervously. He cut his disciple a sharp glance and with his voice lowered, he sternly said, "Eavesdropping is unbecoming."

Having enough sense to appear chastened, Luo Binghe murmured, "...this disciple was waiting for a strategic opening in case he was needed to help Shizun."

Choosing not to justify that with a response, Shen Qingqiu turned his attention to his shidi.

Breathing heavily, Liu Qingge looked up at the two of them. Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead, and his skin was sickly pale. He grunted, "Stop. Fussing."

Mu Qingfang appeared on the other side of the bed. He stole one of Liu Qingge's wrists, and concentrated with his eyebrows furrowed. His jaw twitched. "I…" His shoulders dropped. "This foolish one apologizes, Liu-shixiong. You're affected by proximity to Disciple Luo as well, it seems. I had thought-"

"Doesn't. Matter." Liu Qingge sighed. He glowered between the three of them. "Now we know." His eyes slid to Shen Qingqiu, and there was a new defined level of respect in them. Ah?! What was that look for?? Was it because now they both had a kinship of being tortured by a broken System??? What the fuck! After a few moments, the war god looked at Luo Binghe. His expression softened. "You're awake."

On the other side of the room, the sect leader cleared his throat. He waited until he had everyone's attention, with his hands folded behind his back, and he dipped his head. "This one understands that the three of you are in recovery. He would like to give you the chance to recuperate, but there are extremely pressing matters." His eyes landed on Shen Qingiqu. "Huan Hua Palace is demanding the return of Luo Binghe-"

Anger sharpened Liu Qingge. He sprung into a sitting position, and threw an arm out to shield Luo Binghe from the sect leader. "No."

With a startled yet patient smile, the sect leader continued, "I have no intention of forcing Disciple Luo anywhere he does not wish to go. The Huan Hua Sect is on their way here with other sects to act as 'witness', including the Zhao Hua and Tian Yi sects." His eyes shifted over to Shen Qingqiu, smile growing strained. "And they have gathered… substantial evidence against Qingqiu-shidi."

"Shizun isn't responsible for the sowers!" Luo Binghe said, determined. He stepped past Shen Qingqiu and made himself a barrier between the sect leader and his shizun. For a breathless moment, Shen Qingqiu lost his train of thought. Broad shoulders stood in front of him. Tall and proud. He had the thought many times, but it slammed into him full force now:

Luo Binghe was no longer a child. The person who stood in front of him now was a man. A man that looked ready to burn down the world, just for him.

What a foolish thought!

As if Luo Binghe would do anything of the sort for an old man such as himself!

Something went wrong with Yue Qingyuan's expression. He looked as if he had bitten into a cake, only to realize too late that it was soap. The expression cleared as soon as it formed, and he said with a politician's ease, "It does not matter what *we* believe, Disciple Luo. The matter at hand is that there is a campaign building against Qingqiu-shidi, and we must work together to gather our arguments against it." He turned to Mu Qingfang. "What have you discovered about the curse, Mu-shidi?"

There wasn't a long drawn out silence. The pause between the question and the answer was normal in length, without a hint of hesitation. Mu Qingfang didn't even twitch a glance towards anyone else in the room. His expression remained neutral and pleasant.

To Shen Qingqiu, though, that silence dragged. It hung over his head like a heavy slab of stone, ready to fall on him.

The doctor folded his hands behind his back and answered, "This shidi was successful in using both the soul-summoning array and energy transfusion to bring Shen-shixiong back. As I suspected, their souls and qi are forcefully intertwined. Bringing Shen-shixiong back brought the other two back as well." He dipped his head. "Though, you are not asking about that, you're questioning if they are able to make an appearance for a meeting in preparation for Huan Hua's arrival."

Yue Qingyuan wavered at being caught. Face tightening, he said, "This shixiong is also worried after his shidis and the disciple of the sect. Have you come up with anything to mitigate the curse?"

A neutral smile pulled at Mu Qingfang's lips. "I have a few theories. None that I can be quite certain about. The curse has rooted itself into their qi as well as their souls. From what research I have been able to gather, there is only one readily available method."

"What is it?" Shen Qingqiu asked, feeling his heart in his throat. He ached for a fan, and his fingers tightened around something warm.

It was Liu Qingge's arm.

Ah! When had he started holding on to him!?

Mu Qingfang dipped his head towards the three of them in apology and stated, "Dual cultivation."

Complete and utter silence.

The sect leader's mask broke and his face twisted into a pained expression, not unlike one where you learned that your parents still actively had sex.

On the bed, Liu Qingge became so stiff that a mountain could look at him in envy. His skin painted a bright, colorful rush of red that instantly spread up to the crown of his head.

Luo Binghe's hands spasmed, and a sharp intake of breath lifted his shoulders.

Plowing through the awkward pause, Mu Qingfang continued, "Reaching an equilibrium with the three different systems of qi, along with pacifying the misalignment of each of your souls would require a cumulative-"

"But we're all men!" Shen Qingqiu interrupted, and became horrified that his voice had *cracked.*

The entire room turned to stare at him.

After a few beats of silence, Mu Qingfang said, "...yes?"

"That-" Shen Qingqiu was about to spit out, *that couldn't work!* Then by the grace of whatever god, he stopped himself and snapped his mouth shut in order not to look completely ignorant.

His pause was not missed by the doctor, who lost his cordial smile and said, "...I will provide the necessary learning materials and lecture on safe practices."

Abso-fucking-lutely NOT!

Shen Qingqiu would rather willingly submit himself to becoming a human stick. "That won't be necessary," he said, with as much dignity as he could muster. Since he did not have his fan, he raised his robes to cover the bottom half of his face. His skin was hot.

"...I really think it will be." Mu Qingfang sighed.

"Thanking Mu-shisu," Luo Binghe said with a deep bow, as if being offered to learn an extremely rare combat technique. "This disciple will do his best."

WHAT!?

There was a very real possibility that Shen Qingqiu might faint.

Not that Liu Qingge was doing any better. He had managed to invent a whole new shade of red with his blush. He sat frozen, brain buffering.

Mu Qingfang sighed, expression twisting with an aggrieved patience. "Do *any* of you have experience?"

Straightening, Luo Binghe declared, "No! This one has been waiting for his true loves!"

The righteous declaration snapped Liu Qingge out of his internal crisis. He stared at Luo Binghe as if he had promised to steal his chastity.

Throat tight, Shen Qingqiu turned away from them all. He considered the possibility of making a hasty escape from the room, System malfunction be damned. Would it make him pass out again and save him from this awful conversation?

Awkwardly clearing his throat, Yue Qingyuan said, "...if there are any developments, keep this shixiong informed." He added with a slight wince, "About the curse."

"Of course. This doctor would recommend all three patients stay on Qian Cao Peak until further notice," Mu Qingfang said with a sigh, "though he understands the gravity of the situation at hand. Would Zhangmen-shixiong be amenable to pushing back the meeting to this evening?"

"Yes," the sect leader nodded.

"This master hopes that time allows for him to go back to his Bamboo House and bathe?" Shen Qingqiu asked, stiffly. He wore too thin robes, and there was a layer of grime that had built on his skin.

With a dispirited acceptance, Mu Qingfang said, "Yes, Shen-shixiong. Before leaving, please allow this doctor to run a few more tests."

"If this disciple can make a suggestion?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Mn?" Mu Qingfang glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. It was hard to believe that he knew what Luo Binghe was now – he did not treat him any differently.

"Can some ingredients be delivered to the Bamboo House? Along with a few changes of clothes for Liu-shishu?" Luo Binghe asked, dipping into a bow.

A slight smile tucked into the corner of Mu Qingfang's lips. "Of course, Disciple Luo. I've already requested for new robes to be acquired for you. Give me a moment to make the necessary arrangements, and I will be back."

Hesitantly pleased, Luo Binghe nodded his thanks.

All of them bid a small farewell while the doctor and the sect leader vacated the room.

Shen Qingqiu let out a long breath. The muscles that had tightened on the back of his neck loosened. He swept wrinkles from his thin robes and paced to the other side of the room to find more layers. From the haze of light from the windows, it was early morning. Maybe dawn. He had a few hours yet to prepare to face his martial siblings. He was not looking forward to it. How would he defend himself against a situation that he had no answers for?

As he was on his way, someone caught his hand.

Head bowed, Luo Binghe reverently dropped to the ground on a knee and held that hand in both of his own. "Please, Shizun. Let this disciple heal you!"

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

5,100 words about, which is around a 22 ish minute reading time.

I wanted to give another shout-out to bitchless_in_baihe. She's listened to me prattle on about this fic for *hours* and has helped me bounce a few ideas and even defeated a few of my own heart demons. Thank you!!

She has a few things in the works, and I highly recommend going to go check out her stuff!

No content warnings for this chapter either! I guess we're feeling a bit fluffy these past few chapters, hmm?

Lingering aches sponged up Liu Qingge's sides. He felt as if he had overdone training and ripped his muscles apart. It was awful. He had done such a thing in the past before, though usually the pain was focused around a specific area of his body. Right now it was everywhere. He had absolutely no idea how Shen Qingqiu managed to bite back every single wince after being nearly *half a city* away from Luo Binghe.

At the moment, his shixiong sputtered in the middle of the room. His ears were red, and he used his free hand to cover up the bottom of his face. On his knee, Luo Binghe propositioned his master with an earnest (and eager) expression.

"Binghe!"

"Shizun-"

"Do *not* call me that while asking… *th-that!"*

At least Liu Qingge wasn't the only one thoroughly mortified by the topic at hand.

"What should this disciple call you then?" Luo Binghe asked, eyes sharp and challenging.

Yuan-gege sat unsaid, yet it had its intended effect: a legitimate blush managed to color Shen Qingqiu's face, and he gaped down at his disciple in stupefaction.

"Please," Luo Binghe pleaded, face sobering. "If this one can cure-"

"There is no guarantee it will!" Shen Qingqiu snapped. He tore his hand out of his disciple's grip. "Binghe, you said it yourself! You -" he stammered, unable to finish his own sentence.

You're saving yourself for your true loves. Clearing his throat, he continued, "This old master will *not* take that away from you!"

The fact that Luo Binghe managed not to groan aloud was a testament in itself. Even Liu Qingge had a hard time not rolling his eyes.

He's saving himself for you, you dense idiot!

Gathering himself, Luo Binghe softened his voice and tried again, "If this one can provide-"

"No." Shen Qingqiu glared at his disciple, leaving no room for argument. "This master will *not* discuss this any further, understood?"

Face falling, Luo Binghe stared up at his shizun. He tried a different tactic: his dark eyes watered piteously and clutched a hand at his chest. "Is this one truly so disgusting…?"

Startled, Shen Qingqiu fluttered back to his side and held his face in his hands. "No! Binghe, no. You are *not* disgusting." He cleaned up his face with gentle thumbs.

"...this Binghe is not too gross to sleep with?" There were more waterworks.

"No!" Shen Qingqiu was appalled. "No, Binghe is handsome! Binghe is the best! Anyone would want to sleep with Binghe!"

"...so…" Luo Binghe met his shizun's eyes, looking suspiciously calm. "Shizun would want to sleep with this Binghe?"

Mouth falling open, Shen Qingqiu stared in shock. "B-Binghe!" After a moment, his hand flew to the collar of his robes. The pink of his cheeks strengthened and he snapped, "Binghe! You-" He grabbed at the air for a fan to smack his disciple. Instead, he twisted away. "Do *not* take advantage of this master's predicament!"

What?

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe cried, his voice reaching a shrill of genuine fear. "This one apologizes! He is sorry!" He caught onto the back of Shen Qingqiu's robes and buried his face in them. "He only wants to help!"

Before anyone else could say a word, the door opened. Mu Qingfang stepped in the room and closed the door. In what could only be the epitome of professionalism, he sufficiently ignored the scene laid out before him. "Alright, Shen-shixiong. Let's get that artifact off of you."

Narrowing his eyes, Liu Qingge spoke up for the first time, "What?" A trickle of satisfaction warmed his gut when both Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe turned their full attention to the sound of his voice.

"Mu-shidi put something on Shizun," Luo Binghe said, petulantly. He paused, and there was a conflicting set of emotions in his eyes.

"What." Liu Qingge threw a glare at the doctor.

“It’s mostly harmless,” Mu Qingfang answered with a sigh. “Provided that Shen-shixiong speaks the truth… eventually. This one had to…” He paused, uncertain of what he could say.

Tutting, Shen Qingqiu dragged his disciple off the floor. His face was red as he carefully extracted his robes from grasping hands. He said, “Mu Qingfang knows the truth.”

Liu Qingge twitched.

“Shizun did not answer this one’s question…” Luo Binghe said with a pout.

“Of all-!” Shen Qingqiu shot a truly venomous glare at his disciple. He looked every bit the “Original Goods,” as Shen Yuan would say. “*Binghe!* We are *done* talking about this!” He waved his disciple off and started pacing.

Luo Binghe followed his shizun like a disciplined dog, dragging his feet with a pout.

The Qing Jing Peak Lord started to frantically mumble underneath his breath. “...acting bent! What the...*?”*

Turning his attention away from his grumbling shixiong, Mu Qingfang said, “To be frank Liu-shixiong, this shidi expected you to have the most complaints about such a revelation.”

Frowning, Liu Qingge barely stopped himself from folding his arms. He hardly ever complained!

A smile tugged on Mu Qingfang’s lips. “Excuse me, poor choice of words on my part, Liu-shixiong.”

Yet he did not correct his statement.

A few more words escaped Shen Qingqiu’s frenzied mumbling, none of which made sense. “...stupid wife plot…!” When he turned and saw his disciple there, he threw him a withering glare and he stepped around him to continue his mumbling tirade. “...me?! *Me!? I’m not gay!!”*

Whatever the hell that meant.

“...Shen is Shen.” Liu Qingge glanced away from the doctor to glare at the wall. He ignored the way his skin warmed.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mu Qingfang’s expression soften. “He certainly is.” The doctor turned his attention back to his shixiong, amused as Shen Qingqiu continued to pace around their room with a despondent disciple at his heels. “Ah, Shen-shixiong, if you’re ready?”

“Please!”

The doctor stepped over to him as Shen Qingqiu tugged an ugly pendant out his robes. Both startled. The artifact was shrinking at an alarming rate around Shen Qingqiu’s neck.

“What has Shen-shixiong lied about recently?” Mu Qingfang asked, clearly humored.

Balking at the tightening amulet, Shen Qingqiu said, “I don’t know!” He was bordering on acting a little more like Shen Yuan. It might have been because everyone in the room knew.

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Mu Qingfang calmed. The corner of his lip quirked and he held out a hand. The ugly thing unlatched from Shen Qingqiu’s neck and jumped eagerly into the doctor’s awaiting palm.

“That’s it?” Liu Qingge demanded.

“Care to clarify, Liu-shixiong?” Mu Qingfang asked.

Luo Binghe answered, “Mu-shishu’s reaction to learning the truth is… very accepting.” He had known without even looking at Liu Qingge what he had meant.

“Ah, well, my reaction to Shen-shixiong’s condition is mine and mine alone,” Mu Qingfang said, succinctly with a bland smile. “Though,” his smile softened as he spoke, “this shidi can admit that the current Shen-shixiong has been a friend, and now he knows that his shixiong does not intend any harm.” He held up a warding hand. “Though that does not mean that I will refrain from looking into this matter more.”

Skin turning waxen, Shen Qingqiu murmured, “You think we should tell the others.”

“At least Sect Leader Yue,” Mu Qingfang said.

“No.” Liu Qingge grabbed fistfulls of the sheets. The idea, if he were honest with himself, frightened him. He did not want to be forced into a situation where he had to choose between his loyalty to the sect and his loyalty to himself. He wasn’t quite certain that he could survive it – the moment those two things started to diverge.

“Not now,” Mu Qingfang agreed. The word *eventually* sat heavily over all three of them. There was too much at stake right now to bring something up that hadn’t been an issue for some years now. “Well, now that’s all cleared.” He clapped his hands together. “Let’s make certain none of you are in danger of dying, mn?”

It might have been the worst experience of Liu Qingge’s life, being confined to a room with three other adult men as they were all taught important safety practices on *Dual Cultivation.* He protested, loudly, that he had *already* gone through such education before as a disciple. It did not seem to matter.

The doctor was ruthless.

He wanted to die.

After some routine tests (and training that none of them will EVER speak of again), the three of them were released from Qian Cao Peak. As they had left, Shen Qingqiu stopped to whisper with Mu Qingfang. The words that Liu Qingge caught were: *sword* and *Wan Jian.* Eying Luo Binghe, he realized that the disciple no longer had a sword. With a strained expression, Shen Qingqiu bid the doctor farewell and the three of them finally left. No one dared give Liu Qingge the indignity of supporting him as he walked, though he half wanted them to.

Loves.

Luo Binghe had said true *loves.*

His heart spasmed.

Luo Binghe had also said that Shen Yuan wasn't the only one who was oblivious.

A squirrely feeling rose in his gut, and Liu Qingge wanted to run. He needed to throw himself into a set of training drills or perhaps incite some of his disciples into attacking him because he needed his head clear. Instead his thoughts bounced around like annoying crickets, repeating images and words.

Dual cultivation.

Loves.

Oblivious.

A silent conversation occurred between master and disciple. It was a soundless back and forth that included a single raised eyebrow and a serious nod. When the three of them took off into the sky, Luo Binghe stood behind Liu Qingge on his sword. He did not fight it.

He agreed with it.

Everything hurt and he did not trust himself to not fall off. Though, had anyone dared say such a thing aloud, he wasn't sure if he could have bitten back his pride. Their flight was a quiet one. The last time he had flown with Luo Binghe behind him, the brat couldn't stop poking and prodding him. Today, his hands were solidly on his shoulders. Grounding, polite, and respectful.

Why was Liu Qingge disappointed?

The three of them made it back to the Bamboo House, but not without gaggle of needy disciples gaping at them as they went by. He was certain by evening, the entirety of Qing Jing Peak would know that their master was back in house along with the resurrected Luo Binghe *and* himself.

A little care package sat on the doorstep. Without a word, Luo Binghe picked it up and the three of them made it inside.

The damage that Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe wrought on the place was nearly imperceptible. His eyes darted around, replaying the battle in his mind as he found traces of replaced floorboards and slight scuff marks on the walls. A new table sat in the middle of the room.

There was a low sigh from Shen Qingqiu and he threw a cutting look towards both of them. "If either of you try that again inside my house, neither of you are allowed in here again. *Understood?*"

"This disciple apologizes!" Luo Binghe said, bending into a bow. There was a coy curl to his voice. "Perhaps there is a way he can make it up to you…?"

Shen Qingqiu's mouth dropped. "*Binghe!!"* He scorned, face flushing bright red. "I told you that topic is no longer up for discussion!"

Good fucking luck, Liu Qingge thought. He was silenced by his own flaring abashment.

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe pleaded.

"Enough." Shen Qingqiu drew his shoulders back and made the incorrect argument, "I will not have my disciple feel as if he *owes* me a cure that has no guarantee to work!"

It was the weakest argument. All Luo Binghe needed was to keep the conversation open, and peel through it in that sneaky, bastardly way of his.

Except that Shen Qingqiu *knew* his disciple, so he closed the conversation with a flick of his hand and said, "Come. I need to bathe."

Right. Liu Qingge's mouth dried, and heat pooled in the pit of his stomach. Bathing. He hadn't allowed himself to think of what that would possibly look like with the three of them unable to part. At the moment, his mind supplied helpful images of him, his shixiong, and Luo Binghe all squished naked in a tub, wet skin sliding against another-

Fuck.

They were in the bathing chambers too quickly. And far too quickly after that, there was steam rising from warmed water and three painfully awkward men standing around a tub. He stared into the dancing reflection of the water, mouth dry.

Loves.

It reminded him of the time in the succubi cave, with Madam Meiyan. His throat clenched around the rise of discomfort. The woman had suggested that Shen Qingqiu would have *two* loves. Two.

Could it be…?

A hand caught his shoulder in a gentle, probing way. He startled from his thoughts and found Shen Qingqiu looking up at him, worry lining his expression. “Qingge?”

All the breath swept from Liu Qingge’s lungs. He wanted to kiss him. He wanted to take Shen Qingqiu into his arms, peel away all of his layers, and reverently guide him into the bath. It was a need so sharp he could not breathe.

“Is it the curse?” Shen Qingqiu asked, eyes searching his expression. His hand raised to take a strand of Liu Qingge’s hair and push it behind his ear. “We shouldn’t have pushed you out like that, not without-”

When had…?

When had Liu Qingge become someone that Shen Qingqiu needed to dote on?

His heart was a gooey, bleeding mess in his chest. He wanted to peel it from his chest and present it to the man in front of him. *You left this here. It belongs to you.*

“Fine,” Liu Qingge managed, interrupting him. His voice tasted like gravel on his tongue. “I’m fine.”

Concern glinted in the dark glimmer of Shen Qingqiu’s eyes. The sharpness of his face was softened by the tenderness that was *Shen Yuan* underneath it. “I’ll trust Qingge in this matter to let us know if he needs anything.”

Every damned time he heard that name off those lips he was hit with an insatiable craving to catch the back of Shen Qingqiu’s head and press their lips together. To fight the urge, he blurted something else instead. “Let’s do it.”

It took a while for him to realize what he said.

It took even longer for Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe was the first to flash him a startled glance.

“Excuse me…?” Shen Qingqiu asked, pulling back. The dust of pink on his ears suggested he already understood.

Throat tight, Liu Qingge was embarrassed. The words stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he floundered silently like a buffoon. He knew he needed to finish the statement in order to chip away at Shen Qingqiu’s stubborn denial. His mouth wouldn’t cooperate. He was flustered.

Both Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe stood, patient and waiting.

Fuck.

Face growing hot, Liu Qingge shoved some form of words through his teeth. “Cure us. Fix the curse. Let’s do it.”

Eyes widening, Shen Qingqiu took another step back. He looked betrayed. “Qingge!”

A soft almost whine of a breath escaped Liu Qingge. His hands curled into tight fists at his sides to stop himself from lunging forward.

“Not you too!” Shen Qingqiu threw an annoyed glance between the two of them. “Are you two serious? Neither of you owe me *anything.* Stop this! Now go, go!” He shooed them off. “I am bathing. We are no longer talking about this!”

Any further attempts to speak were drowned out by Shen Qingqiu’s anger. He was a raving storm and would not be interrupted. In a matter of moments, Liu Qingge found himself standing stiltedly behind a privacy wall with Luo Binghe at his side. Through the thin paper, he watched a flustered silhouette of Shen Qingqiu begin the process of disrobing.

He felt the weight of his heart between his teeth.

Beside him, Luo Binghe unceremoniously plopped to the ground.

Liu Qingge was grateful for it and sank down next to him with little grace. Only when his head leaned back and hit the wall, did he realize that Luo Binghe had sat on *purpose.* For him. Because he knew that Liu Qingge would force himself to keep standing and not give in to the way his muscles ached and trembled. He cracked his eyes open and nodded to the other man.

A small smile pulled at the corner of Luo Binghe’s lips, and he dipped his head respectfully in turn.

Now, all they had to do was wait for their turn to bathe.

It was torture. Every whisper of sliding silk hit him low. A few layers of robes draped over the top of the privacy screen. Liu Qingge considered biting his own fist.

Luo Binghe shifted back and forth on his seat. In an impressive attempt at appearing nonplussed, he stared down at his fingernails and began to pick imaginary dirt from underneath them.

His reddened face was the only thing that gave him away.

Closing his eyes, Liu Qingge folded his body into a meditative pose and began to count his breaths. He did not listen to the soft intake of Shen Qingqiu’s breath as he hit the warm water. Nor did he pay attention to the sounds of water displacing as he sank into the bath. And he absolutely did *not* hear the light moan that Shen Qingqiu made when he finally settled into the soothing heat.

Nope.

Definitely not.

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge muttered through his teeth.

“Yes, Liu-shishu?”

The politeness was an affordable distraction. Liu Qingge could not ignore the way that a wall had sprouted between the two of them ever since their talk in the bathroom – a conversation that kept echoing inside his mind.

“Explain,” he demanded, quietly.

There was a long length of almost silence. The only sounds were the torturous noises of bathing.

When he finally broke and opened his eyes, he saw Luo Binghe staring forlornly at the ground. It was such a heart wrenching picture, the loneliness that hung around him. As soon as he noticed Liu Qingge’s attention, it snapped away in an instant and there was a too-polite smile with no trace of sorrow. “This disciple is confused. Explain what, Liu-shishu?”

“Liar,” Liu Qingge said, without any venom. He raised an eyebrow.

“If you two are *conspiring,*” Shen Qingqiu warned from the bath.

“We’re not conspiring,” Liu Qingge raised his voice, staring down the man beside him. “Reminding Binghe that he must not decide how others feel for them.”

The expression on Luo Binghe’s face shattered. Underneath it was something raw – something that came from growing up in a world where love was *earned* and not *given.* He blinked at Liu Qingge, a question in his eyes.

Liu Qinge didn’t have an answer. Not now.

His line of thought was completely obliterated when Shen Qingqiu said, “There’s *no* guarantee that Dual Cultivation is going to fix any of this! I am not going to force either of you to do something you’re not comfortable with! That is that! How many times do I have to say it!?”

“Not comfortable?” Luo Binghe echoed.

“Yes! First off, Binghe! You’re my disciple! Second, Liu Qingge’s asexual!”

“A *what?”* Liu Qingge asked.

On the other side of the privacy screen, Shen Qingqiu sputtered.

“Yuan,” Liu Qingge snapped before he could continue his tirade, “*none* of these arguments are about what *you* want.”

There was no answer.

Crossing his arms, Liu Qingge glared. “Stop deciding for us. Decide for yourself.”

The conversation ebbed away. Sounds of bathing resumed.

On his left, he had a young man who was refusing to explain what he said in another world. In front of him, beyond a flimsy configuration of wood, was the very man that he'd been in l-

That he'd-

Liu Qingge stared down at his fists.

How could he get frustrated with either of these two when he couldn't even admit to himself that he-

His face fell into his hands. He didn't care how he looked, posture withered. All he wanted to do was find something to hit and to have something hit him back so he could stop fucking *thinking*.

"…this one knows his shidi and his disciple," Shen Qingqiu spoke as if each word was fragile. "He knows how much either of you will sacrifice, and he… does not want either of you to force yourself into a position over something as trivial as this one's health. We must simply wait it out."

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe breathed with half a sigh.

"Alright." Liu Qingge set his hands on his knees. "Understood. I won't be sacrificing anything."

Luo Binghe gave him half a smile.

"*Qingge,"* Shen Qingqiu sputtered.

"Qingqiu." Liu Qingge paused, and added, "Yuan. Binghe is an adult. I am an adult. We can make our own decisions. It is not out of guilt."

"I can't fucking believe," Shen Qingqiu's mask broke, and he was small and angry and fully Shen Yuan as he ranted under his breath, "the fucking *War God of... "* He smothered his own quiet rant by slipping underneath the water. After a few seconds, he popped back out, "…*with me! What is going on with the plot?!* Hello?!"

Liu Qingge snorted.

At his side, Luo Binghe wore a fondly humored smile.

Shen Yuan paused, perhaps realizing that the bathing room was not a good place to have a private soliloquy. "I can't believe this."

"Obviously," Liu Qingge muttered, dryly.

A hand caught Luo Binghe's surprised laugh. He turned his face away, attempting to swallow it down.

"What did you say?!" Shen Yuan sniped.

Shrugging, he raised his voice and repeated himself. “Obviously.”

This time, Luo Binghe did not smother his laugh.

“I liked it better when you two tore apart my house,” Shen Yuan muttered, grumpily.

Liu Qingge smiled.

“If Shizun was so impressed by our display, this Binghe is certain Liu-shishu wouldn’t mind showing him another type of tussle…?” Luo Binghe said, coyly.

Heat rushed through Liu Qingge, and he threw a scathing glance at the younger man. “Sh-Shameless,” he hissed.

“I don’t think the two of you wrestling would be any less destructive to my house,” Shen Yuan said. He slid from the bathtub, the sound of falling water tracing after him.

Any indignation Liu Qingge felt fled, and he shared an exasperated glance with Luo Binghe.

How the *hell* was that man so oblivious?!

Luo Binghe laughed. It was a warm, delightful sound that spilled into the air the way sunshine leaks through clouds on a cold winter’s day.

A smile sneaked its way onto Liu Qingge’s lips before he even realized it was happening.

In between shuffling silks, a voice called, “What?”

More laughter spilled into Luo Binghe and he rolled back, delighted. “Nothing, Shizun!”

“It certainly sounds like something!”

Liu Qingge decided not to answer, and hid a smirk in the shake of his head.

“Life is *so* unfair,” Shen Yuan muttered under his breath, petulantly. “Each of you alone is already too OP and now I have to deal with this shit…?”

It was nice to hear Luo Binghe’s laugh thicken, which was definitely not by any accident on Shen Yuan’s part. The conversation turned to safer topics as everyone else took their turn bathing.

Not that it stopped the thoughts of Dual Cultivation from hanging over all of their heads.

All three of them had loose and damp hair as they piled into the kitchen. The bath did wonders for Liu Qingge’s aching joints, yet still he could not stop himself from collapsing to

the ground. His back fell against the wall and his head rolled back. In a reflection of the first time he sat in this kitchen, Shen Qingqiu sat elegantly beside him. He was too close for propriety standards, but close enough to offer some support. After some quiet deliberation, Liu Qingge took it and leaned lightly against him.

Both of them ignored the blush that flushed both of their cheeks.

Luo Binghe worked swiftly, first setting up some tea. Once water was heating, he laid out the ingredients gifted to them. Morning light filtered in through the windows, and delicately traced the outline of his formidable silhouette. His hair fell around him in loose curls, barely obscuring the wide set of his shoulders. He tied up the sleeves of his robes, exposing his wrists and strong forearms. His hands gathered all of his loose hair, strong fingers working with the curls to expertly tie it back in a hasty bun.

Exhaustion tugged at Liu Qingge. It was embarrassing how much of his weight started to slowly shift onto his shixiong. He couldn't stop himself. He stared at a loose curl that escaped Luo Binghe's bun. He ached to step over, tuck it away, and kiss the back of his exposed neck.

(*What?)*

Luo Binghe decided on what he was making. In an instant, he was a flurry of activity. Each motion was swift and practiced. He washed rice. Heated some pans. Chopped vegetables. It was rhythmic, graceful and-

Some time later, Liu Qingge awoke with a start. His head had fallen completely against Shen Qingqiu's shoulder. His skin prickled with a blush and he pushed himself up, a quiet apology falling from his lips.

A warm smile filled Shen Qingqiu's lips, his eyes warm and soft. "Qingge can rest more if he likes, we have some time before tonight's meeting."

Liu Qingge wanted to. Aches and pains made his head heavy and his eyes had a hard time staying open. He fought it. They needed a battle plan. First, they had to figure out what accusations were thrown against the Qing Jing Peak Lord. Then they needed to determine what ones might *actually* be legitimate, considering that none of them could account for the Original Goods. And somehow, after all of that, they had to ensure that Cang Qiong Sect was willing to back them. That was only the start of it. *Then* they would need to figure out how to prevent Hua Huan Sect from stealing away Luo Binghe *and* destroying Shen Qingqiu's reputation.

It was all a big fucking headache.

He wished he could just punch the Palace Master and be done with it.

"This Binghe suggests we leave any discussion until after our meal," the disciple said, standing over a pot. His back was turned from them, but he had a smile in his voice. "Rest, Liu-shishu."

He wanted to fight it.

A hand hesitantly drew him down. He fought it weakly, and then gave up. With only a grumble of protest, he slid down with his head pillowed by silk and heat. His fatigue won.

The next time consciousness drew towards him, he felt fingers gliding through his loose hair. He hadn't tied it back up after bathing. Right now, with fingers gently tracing over his scalp, he had no regrets in letting his hair dry slowly.

"Qingge," a gentle voice murmured above him. "The food is prepared."

His eyes cracked open. Haloed by a dark curtain of hair, Shen Qingqiu leaned over him. As soon as he noticed he was awake, his shixiong pulled back as if expecting him to spring up and off the floor.

A few days ago, Liu Qingge might have. But just last night he hardly slept because Shen Yuan wrapped around him like a desperate snake. They had long since passed any propriety boundaries. That fact did not stop his skin from burning. He was using this man's thigh as a pillow and everywhere was the scent of *him.*

He did not want to move.

"Qingge?" Shen Qingqiu smiled, his eyes crinkling. "Are you not really awake yet?" He held up his free arm to shield the bottom half of his face.

I am, Liu Qingge thought. He just didn't want to move. Not once had he ever even allowed himself to hope for something like this, but now that it was happening he didn't want it to ever end.

"Does Shishu need to be carried?" a playful voice spoke somewhere above him.

Liu Qingge glowered. "No."

Amusement sprinkled Shen Qingqiu's eyes. "Does Qingge want to go back to sleep?"

Yes. He sighed. "No."

With the strength of a god, because that's what it took to encourage himself to get out of Shen Qingqiu's lap, Liu Qingge sat up. He managed to make it to his feet without any support, and used the wall to steady himself.

After his extended nap, his body had recovered a bit more from the torture it withstood earlier. Experimentally, he stretched out his arms and rolled his head. He felt more… *attached* to himself.

Two pairs of eyes followed each and every single one of his moments. He was used to people watching him – and he had gotten used to ignoring them. These eyes, though, he appreciated. He felt beautiful in a way that he never had before.

Pushing his hair behind his shoulder, he raised a single eyebrow towards both of them. His shixiong dipped his chin, ears pink, while Luo Binghe met that eyebrow with a shameless grin. With a shake of his head, Liu Qingge was the first to walk back out into the main room.

The other two followed, Luo Binghe with a large tray of plates and food and Shen Qingqiu speaking softly about something or other. Sometimes the man liked to fill up the quiet with words, not that Liu Qingge ever minded. He loved hearing the way sounds formed on the other man's tongue.

The three settled down at the table. Luo Binghe set everything up, and not before long they were eating.

As two pairs of eyes probed Liu Qingge, he found himself only mildly embarrassed. He threw a warning glare to each of them, even if he didn't really mean it. His skin warmed and he took a bite.

"Another smile," Shen Qingqiu said, as if the world had set itself right.

"This one is glad Liu-shishu likes the food." Real warmth spilled into Luo Binghe's voice, making it warble slightly with his enthusiasm.

It was cute. Liu Qingge's smile grew, and he dipped his head, "Satisfactory," he said, even if it was beyond that.

Luo Binghe beamed as if he had been handed a piece of the moon.

Hiding a pleased smile of his own, Shen Qingqiu threw some pieces of food in his mouth. The rest of the meal passed by with amicable conversation. Most of it was fueled by his shixiong and his disciple. Every now and then Liu Qingge offered a grunt or noise for his part. Neither asked for anything more.

It was perhaps one of the easiest meals he has sat through, aside from the ones that he shared with his sister. He had never felt more at peace.

He had never felt more at home.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

6.3k words, which is roughly a 27 minute reading time.

Longest chapter yet, I believe? I considered splitting this one, but... nah

Also, unfortunately, my health is turning sour so please excuse any typos. 🙏

Content Warning: Negative thoughts, the Luo Binghe special

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Considering their situation, it was mildly amusing that when one of them needed to go somewhere, the other two followed like obedient little ducklings. Luo Binghe stood by the wash basin, with Liu Qingge at his side. Both of them worked on cleaning up after their meal while Shen Qingqiu rested against the counter. He filled the room with his voice, pondering aloud. His head sat in his hands, and his posture was abhorrent, but he was still peerless in grace and beauty.

Seeing this part of his shizun was a gift. It was maybe one of the best ways that Shen Qingqiu told someone that he cared for them – by allowing his mask to slip. Right now he nearly had it off completely.

Shen Yuan plucked at a lock of hair and examined the ends with a scrutinizing eye. “We need more information. The Peak Lord Meeting is going to be awful.” He sighed, eyebrows pressing together as his eyes fluttered shut. “They’re going to ask about the accusations, which I don’t really *know* what they are, and somehow I am going to have to bull…” His eyes fluttered open and he looked between the two of them, and quietly corrected himself, “I am going to have to fabricate something then and there.” He sighed, pressing both of his palms into the counter as he leaned back to roll his eyes. “Ugh…” His collapsed back down against the counter, muttering what seemed like nonsense under his breath.

Now that Luo Binghe understood *slightly* more about his shizun, some of it made a little sense.

“First… the sowers, which did not happen…!” Shen Yuan rubbed his temples with a deep frown. “...they said I conspired with them? On what grounds? Maybe… Binghe…?” His voice trailed away and died with whatever question he was going to form.

Luo Binghe considered the tangent. It was possible that because of his connection to the demon realm, his shizun thought he had something to do with that. The thought made his

heart sink. “Shizun,” he said, turning to him. His eyes prickled. “This disciple would never.”

There was a flicker in his shizun’s expression, and the mask was back. He was Shen Qingqiu. It felt like rejection.

Before Luo Binghe could spiral, beside him, Liu Qingge asked, “What happened in the book?”

Ah. That annoying *book.* It seemed to be both a blessing and curse — it gave his shizun advantageous knowledge… and a lot of false preconceptions. Luo Binghe turned back to the dishes, trying not to let his mood sour.

Liu Qingge shifted closer and bumped his shoulder.

The physical contact grounded him.

“…well,” Shen Qingqiu started. He shifted uncomfortably behind them, letting the break in conversation stretch.

It was a long enough silence that both Luo Binghe and his shishu stopped and turned to him. His shizun stared slightly to the left, as he did when he was looking at the System. That faraway expression Luo Binghe had seen on him several times before. It angered him that this entire time that expression was his shizun communicating with the invasive entity and not just a little quirk.

“Well?” Liu Qingge prompted.

“Shizun doesn’t know if speaking here will anger the System,” Luo Binghe said with a sigh.

“...about that.” Shen Qingqiu sighed, his shoulders falling. “Are the two of you done?”

Exchanging a look with his shishu, Luo Binghe turned back to the dishes and resolved to finish. He figured either way it would allow Shizun to piece together what he didn’t want to say, and maybe break a little more through that thin face of his. It was hard not being frustrated.

At least it was easier without Xin Mo. The sword’s influence on him was a distant buzz. He knew if he wanted, he could demand the return of his sword. At the moment, he did not see the point of that. He did not need it.

(There was a quiet childish fear that nestled next to his heart – that he was vulnerable and trapped without it. He ignored that, for now.)

With the last dish dry and put away, Luo Binghe turned to his shizun and tried to stand with polite patience. Sometimes he really wanted to grab Shen Qingqiu by the shoulders and shake him until explanations fell out. He wondered if Liu Qingge shared that sentiment.

By the crunched expression on the war god’s face, it seemed likely.

“The System… doesn’t seem to care, if it’s you two,” Shen Qingqiu said, slowly. His eyes slid to that space as if waiting. If Luo Binghe focused, he could sense the threads of the other entity. His eyes narrowed. All at once, Shen Qingqiu slammed a fist into an open palm, “I got it!” He turned an excited glance towards the two of them. “Shang Qinghua.”

“Shang Qinghua,” Liu Qingge echoed, dryly.

“Yes.” A self-satisfied smile spilled across Shizun’s lips. “We need to figure out *what* the original goods did before we can begin to build up suitable arguments!”

“Yuan,” Liu Qingge sighed. “What?”

“Come on. It’ll be faster to explain once we’re there.” Shen Qingqiu turned and rushed from the room, energy swarming around him. Now that he had a clear goal, it would be difficult to dissuade him.

With matching sighs, both Luo Binghe and the war god followed him out of the kitchen. Luo Binghe didn’t even attempt to hide his souring mood or irritation. He pouted. Seeing that *rat* did not sound like it would be any more productive than the three of them sharing a nice quiet day to themselves until the meeting.

Shen Qingqiu led them back into his bedroom. He snatched a fan and bustled past them. Under his breath, he murmured, “...hack author…” and a few choice other words that even Luo Binghe’s demonic hearing had a hard time picking up.

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe called, delicately. He watched his shizun head straight towards the front door.

With a bemused smile, Liu Qingge caught his shixiong by the arm. “Yuan.”

Startled, Shen Qingqiu looked at him, and then turned a curious glance towards Luo Binghe. “Yes?”

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe laughed. “Shouldn’t we… get dressed first?”

Shen Qingqiu glanced down at the simple robes he wore after his bath. And then studied the other two. His fan flicked open, concealing his expression. He cleared his throat and said, “Ah. Yes.” When he caught both Luo Binghe and his shidi sharing a look, he snapped his fan shut and whacked Luo Binghe’s shoulder.

Swallowing a laugh, he followed after his shizun.

All too quickly, the three of them were presentable, outside, and preparing to take off to An Ding Peak. Luo Binghe had worn a wet pout the entire time, hoping to inspire his shizun to change his mind. He even stood so that the sunlight would catch the pathetic glint in his eye.

Unfortunately, his shizun knew him too well and didn't look over at him.

"Let's go," Shen Qingqiu said, preparing to draw his sword.

"Wait," Liu Qingge said. He eyed Xiu Ya and turned that eye towards Luo Binghe. "Come." He turned and started down a path around the Bamboo House.

Startled, Luo Binghe rushed after him.

"Qingge?" Shen Qingqiu asked, taking up the end of their little line.

Again, there was no explanation as the war god led them down a path. Luo Binghe wondered if he was quietly exacting revenge against Shen Qingqiu's own lack of explanations. Then he decided that was too petty for his shishu.

There were a few gardens that surrounded the Bamboo House. He had many memories built in these gardens. The echoes of warm days accented with gentle breezes played in the back of his mind. They passed by one small garden with a wooden bench, and he saw a ghost of his shizun elegantly lazing about with a book in hand while Luo Binghe practiced sword forms. His heart clenched with a strange sense of homesickness. He knew that they would never go back to those days. Bitterness sank his heart like a heavy stone.

They came to break in the bamboo trees. It was well-manicured, with only a few stray leaves littering the ground. Someone had taken great care of this area. Stones were placed meticulously, enhancing the natural beauty of the landscape. The pathway was artistically drawn out to the center. Luo Binghe's breath disappeared from his lungs. His hands went numb. When he was a disciple, he used this space to practice. He recalled more than a few lessons by shizun's guiding hand. The gentle warmth of his encouragement as he corrected his form or helped guide him through qi exercises. It no longer was that empty space from his memories.

It was a memorial.

In the middle of the clearing, on a little mound, Zheng Yang pierced the ground.

"He mourned," Liu Qingge said, quiet and insistent.

A strangled sound of embarrassment left Shen Qingqiu. He flustered. "*Qingge!"* He smacked his arm with his fan. "If I wanted to, I would have-"

There was a look of heat in Liu Qingge's eyes, which Shizun misunderstood and took a half step back, paling. In an instant, the fan snapped open and covered the bottom half of his face.

Luo Binghe turned away from both of them and took a few halting steps before he collapsed down to his knees before the mound. His throat clenched and ached. His vision melted away into tears. His head bowed.

A hand settled onto his shoulder and squeezed.

You're wanted, Liu Qingge seemed to say without a single word. A stalwart reminder. Something that Luo Binghe should not forget.

Reaching up, Luo Binghe clutched onto that hand. It was a lifeline. Time and time again he had convinced himself that he was a beast that was undeserving of something as simple as love. There was a point when he wondered if he was capable of it at all. He had thought he only ever *tricked* people into tolerating him.

But…

He mourned.

"I suppose Binghe should have his sword back," Shen Qingqiu said stiffly behind them. "That is… if he wants it."

If Luo Binghe was trying not to choke on a mouthful of tears, he might have laughed. His shizun spoke as if this entire endeavor was about the sword. And even then, he spoke as if Luo Binghe would ever *dare* reject it. "Sh-Shizun…"

It wasn't about the sword. His shizun never said how he felt. He might complain and grumble, but someone had to look at his actions and behavior to get any clue on any other emotion. And even then, any guesses were dubious at best.

But this?

You matter to me, the memorial said. *I missed you.*

It said, *I love you.*

"Come on." Shen Qingqiu hit his fan into the palm of his hand and turned on his heel. He started back down the path. "We don't have too much time before the meeting, and this master would prefer to be prepared-"

Luo Binghe stared at him over his shoulder, a mess of emotions.

The corner of Liu Qingge's mouth quirked up. He met Luo Binghe's eyes and gave a subtle nod towards Shen Qingqiu.

It was all Luo Binghe needed. He tore from the ground and in two steps he captured his shizun in his arms, folding him into his chest. His face pressed between his shizun's shoulder blades. Tears spilled and stained silk. He did not care. "Shizun," he choked, pathetically.

All it took was that single word for Shen Qingqiu to melt. There was a smile in his voice as he tutted and patted the arms that captured him. "Binghe," he scorned lightly. "What is this? Stop crying."

"*Shizun,"* Luo Binghe repeated, and he wanted Shen Qingqiu to know what that word meant to him after all these years: *I love you.*

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu murmured. He twisted just enough to wrap a single arm around Luo Binghe, and to use the other to consolingly pat his head. “What are these tears?” He cleaned his face with a gentle hand, even as more tears spilled to take the place of the old ones. “You’re a man now, aren’t you?”

“This disciple…” Luo Binghe tried to figure out the words to say *thank you* without completely obliterating his shizun’s thin face. He settled with closing his eyes and resting their foreheads together.

Shen Qingqiu stiffened, surprised at the intimate gesture.

“This disciple missed his master dearly,” Luo Binghe said. His voice was shredded by his own emotions. “He is very happy to know he was missed, as well.”

“Very missed,” Liu Qingge corrected.

“Q-Qingge,” Shen Qingqiu hissed. He cleared his throat. “Ah. Well. Good.” He patted Luo Binghe’s shoulder, and started to try and extract himself from the tight hold.

If Luo Binghe had a choice, he would never let him go. The darkest parts of his heart wanted to lock both his shizun and shishu away and keep them to himself. He knew better. Instead of giving in, he soaked up some more warmth before he reluctantly let his arms drop.

Hiding behind his fan, Shen Qingqiu said, “Grab your sword, Binghe. Let’s go.” He shot his shidi a warning glare, as if to say, *Try something like that again without my permission, and we’ll see where that gets you.*

In response, Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. *Like what? Another smack from your fan?*

Shen Qingqiu huffed, turning away. It did nothing to hide the reddening of his ears.

A smile spilled over Liu Qingge’s lips. As he passed by his shixiong, he narrowed his eyes at him and dared, “Try me.”

“Qingge!” With a squawk of indignation, Shen Qingqiu whipped around the fan for another smack.

Eyes dark and smoldering, Liu Qingge caught the hand holding the fan and yanked it towards him. He pressed a slow, possessive kiss on the inside of Shen Qingqiu’s wrist.

The fan slid from Shen Qingqiu’s fingers and clattered to the ground.

Both stared at the other, dumbfounded. Neither seemed to be able to believe what Liu Qingge had just done.

Then Shen Qingqiu began to sputter. There was a mess of words that came from his mouth, sentences without any real structure.

In no better state, Liu Qingge snatched back his hand as if he touched a stranger’s hair. His face turned a brilliant crimson, and his mouth tightened into a thin line. In the whites of his

eyes, there was a quiet panic.

Before either of them could spiral any further, Luo Binghe stepped in with a grin and said, “Liu-shishu warned Shizun!” He stepped between the two, acting as a safe wall for them both as they composed themselves, and reached down to pluck the fan from the ground. His gut was a twisting mess of want and need, and more than anything he really did *not* want to go to An Ding Peak.

He wanted to go back into his shizun’s bedroom and see all the other different ways his shishu could make him unravel.

Shen Qingqiu tried a response, and it turned into an adorable mess of sounds that definitely did *not* make any real words.

Instead of pointing this out, Luo Binghe nodded and said, “Shizun is right. We should get going.”

Behind him, Liu Qingge looked seconds away from taking off. His hands clenched and unclenched from tight fists.

To give him something to do, Luo Binghe placed the fan in his hand and said, “I’ll get my sword, if Liu-shishu could give this back to Shizun…?”

Liu Qingge stared down at the fan as if it were a snake about to strike him.

The time it took for Luo Binghe to grab Zheng Yang, neither of the other two moved. Shen Qingqiu stared off into the distance as if the very world had shattered underneath him and he was trying to make sense of it. Meanwhile, the war god was caught in paralysis and facing what he had just done.

Luo Binghe couldn’t help the frustrated warmth that sank through him. He adored *both* of them. And he wanted to shake both of them. How did neither of them see the way they looked at another?

With a roll of his eyes, he shoved his shishu into motion.

Grunting, Liu Qingge stumbled to his shixiong. The two stared at another, surprised. Then the war god remembered he had the fan, and he held it out as an offering.

Clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu took the fan. He immediately opened it and hid behind it. “Thanking Qingge.”

The war god relaxed, hearing his name. He nodded once, awkwardly, and turned. Without another word, he stormed back down the path and left them to chase after him.

By the time the three of them took to their swords, it appeared that Shen Qingqiu had reached a level of (mis)understanding, and said, “This entire time…” He shook his head, as if betrayed. “To think my shidi was hiding the fact he was an utter *menace.”*

“Only to those I care about,” Liu Qingge responded, dryly.

Both of them froze.

Luo Binghe could not stop himself from rolling his eyes.

The three of them had a *long* way to go, and it was going to be an arduous journey to get there.

An Ding Peak was in its usual uproar. They went straight to the peak lord's personal home without so much as a blink from Shen Qingqiu. He knew the path well. Despite the slight reassurance from recovering Zheng Yang, Luo Binghe found his mood souring again. He did not like that his shizun had frequented this man's house enough to not even question whether or not he was allowed.

None of the disciples seemed to question his presence either, and only did double-takes for the war god and Luo Binghe. He tried not to be jealous.

He was unsuccessful.

When they reached the door to the man's home, Shen Qingqiu knocked impertinently. His eyes narrowed. "Shang-shidi. Open the door."

There was scrambling on the other side of the door, and a frantic yelp. Luo Binghe cocked his head to the side and held up a hand, expanding his awareness. There was an array that wrapped around the building. The purpose itself was hard to discern, but by the fact that Luo Binghe did not sense *anything* inside the building seemed to be an answer in itself. Curious. His eyes narrowed. It took a bit before the door plucked open.

On the other side, Shang Qinghua was a bit of a mess. Pieces of hair slid free from its usual style, and it looked as if he had just thrown on his over robe. Bruises splattered his pale skin, and one of his arms rested in a sling. There were minor cuts on his face as well. His eyes slid between all three of them, and he blanched when caught sight of Luo Binghe.

"Thanking Shang-shidi for his hospitality," Shen Qingqiu said, and pushed his way into the house.

"B-Bro!" Shang Qinghua hissed under his breath. He balked and scrambled backwards as both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge followed after him. Clearing his throat, Shang Qinghua slipped past them and rushed into his receiving room. "Shen-shixiong, is now *really* that great of a time? Maybe… in like a week? Or two? Or five?"

"This master thinks that now is the perfect time," Shen Qingqiu said. He sat down at a table, prim and proper with his fan hiding his expression. "Will Shang-shidi make us some tea?"

A soft whine escaped Shang Qinghua. He dragged his feet away from the three of them and began the process of putting together tea.

Luo Binghe turned a scrutinized eye around the place. There was that slight displacement of energy. As soon as they had stepped in, he stopped being able to sense both his shizun and his shishu. The rat was *absolutely* hiding someone. He wondered where *he* would be.

The corner of his lip quirked, amused at the idea of a certain *someone* forced to hide in a cramped wardrobe. He glanced over at his shizun and asked, "Why Shang Qinghua?"

"Manners," Liu Qingge murmured.

Luo Binghe pouted.

His shishu rolled his eyes and shook his head, fighting back a smile.

Surprisingly enough, Shen Qingqiu didn't have a comment and instead said, "We'll get some answers as soon as Shang-shidi returns."

A sigh left Liu Qingge. He crossed his arms and frowned at the table.

"Does Liu-shishu want to spar later?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Yes," Liu Qingge answered immediately. His eyes lit up at the possibility, his back straightening.

"*Not* in my house," Shen Qingqiu muttered. "Is Qingge recovered?"

"Yes!" Liu Qingge said, eyes narrowed in offense.

At that moment, Shang Qinghua came back to the table with tea. Despite him only having one available arm, no one raised to help him. Once everyone had a warm cup sitting in front of them, the little rat of a man sat practically vibrating with nervous energy. He kept *not* looking at Luo Binghe, and trying to throw not-so-subtle glances towards Shen Qingqiu.

"Well?" Liu Qingge asked.

"Qinghua," Shen Qingqiu nodded to him. "We need to know more about Shen Qingqiu."

Shang Qinghua's eyes widened. "Bro?"

"They know," Shen Qingqiu said with a nod, sweeping his fan towards them. "Everything."

"Oh, thank *fuck,"* Shang Qinghua exploded into motion, hand slamming down onto the table. "Bro?! *Bro?!* What the fuck?! What the *actual* fuck!!" He reached over and grabbed onto the front of Shen Qingqiu's robes, shaking him. "Is your System fucked? Mine is fucked! What is going on?!"

Disdain twisted Shen Qingqiu — no, Shen Yuan's — features and he whipped at his fan and smacked the grabby hand. "Let go of me."

"Bro?!!" Shang Qinghua cried. "Are you kidding me?! I thought I was fucking done for!! I keep going back. *I keep going back!* Do you know who showed up in the middle of my shitty

fucking apartment? *Do you know who?!* Thank god it wasn't the first time I woke up! I was covered in my own piss because I should have fucking died, but no! Just laying in the middle of my own apartment for fucking *weeks!"*

"Weeks?" Shen Yuan echoed, aghast.

"Yes, bro! *Yes!!* How long do you think I've been here?! I grew up here! It's been *years!"* Shang Qinghua's voice had risen and he was shouting now. "What the *fuck* is going on?!"

"Didn't anyone find you?!" Shen Yuan gaped.

"No." Shang Qinghua looked at him as if he were stupid. "Who was going to look for me, bro? All my bills were just taken out of my accounts, which, I am in the fucking red for by the way.*"*

"*Unhand Shizun,"* Luo Binghe interrupted, cold and low.

Immediately, Shang Qinghua dropped him and sprung back like he held hot coals. "Holy shit."

"Black lotus," Shen Yuan mouthed, startled.

Liu Qingge looked quite pleased with Luo Binghe's interruption and he nodded subtly to him.

"Cucumber-bro," Shang Qinghua groaned. He flopped dramatically on the ground and covered his face with his hand. "What the *fuck* is happening with the System?!"

Ears reddening, Shen Yuan kicked the soggy rat of a man. "Don't call me that!" He hissed.

"Bro, watch out! You think this sling is just an accessory!?" Shang Qinghua yelped. "You said they know everything!"

"Why the *hell* would I tell them that?!" Shen Yuan snapped.

"Bro, I don't know, I'm a fucking mess. I just came back today for some reason," Shang Qinghua whined, pathetically.

"Sit up," Shen Yuan ordered, and he kicked him again. "So you've been sent back too? With… *him?"*

"Yes! Cucumber-bro, *come on!"* Shang Qinghua whined. He pulled himself up into a sitting position and held his head in his hand.

"When did it first happen?" Shen Yuan asked.

"I don't know what day it is!" Shang Qinghua threw his hand in the air. "I don't fucking know!"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Shen Yuan sighed.

“Qingqiu,” Liu Qingge said, “this explains *nothing.”*

“He wrote PIDW,” Shen Yuan said, throwing a hand out to the weasel of a man on the other side of the table.

“What.” Liu Qingge’s expression shuddered as if he had taken a bite of something rotten.

If Luo Binghe wasn’t so aghast himself, he would have laughed. Wait. He *was* laughing. It tumbled out of him, choked full of disbelief. He was glad he set the tea cup down. If he hadn’t, he might have pieces of ceramic in his hands.

Shang Qinghua paled by several shades and he scuttled back, staring at him in terror. “Cucumber-bro.”

“*Airplane,”* Shen Yuan hissed. “Do not call me that!”

“Yuan.” Liu Qingge almost sounded as if he was begging.

Too bad it was in this context.

“What?” Shen Yuan glanced at him, clearly confused as to what else needed to be explained.

“He gets *‘Yuan’* and I am stuck with Peerless Cucumber?!” Shang Qinghua squawked.

Shen Yuan’s face blanked out with rage. It was…incredibly hot. He turned to Shang Qinghua.

“Bro.” Shang Qinghua held up his hand. “Cucumber-bro, hold on-“

The peak lord’s yelps and begging was only *mildly* satisfying.

Unfortunately, Shen Yuan broke his fan.

Luo Binghe had taken over the rat’s kitchen to prepare what he could for snacks and tea. He needed to do something with his hands, and that meant both his shizun and shishu had flooded in after him. At the moment, Liu Qingge paced like a caged beast and his shizun rubbed his hands over his face, very clearly regretting this entire trip.

It made sense, of course, that if there was a book there was a writer. But the fact that they met the writer made it all real. And the fact that it was *that man* made it all worse.

A hand pressed against his shoulder blades, grounding him and startling him all at once. He looked over his shoulder and saw Liu Qingge standing there, watching him with sharp eyes. He cocked his head in question.

“This one is fine,” Luo Binghe assured.

Liu Qingge grunted and left him to pace the kitchen again.

Warmth settled over him like thin webbing. He stared down at the boiling water, throat tight. At some point he became someone that Liu Qingge would wordlessly check in on and offer comfort. He had become *someone* to the war god. The tangles of his mind eased ever so slightly and he found himself smiling as he finished preparing their snack.

“I thought this would be easier,” Shen Yuan sighed. He hadn’t pulled back on his Immortal Master mask, which Luo Binghe both adored and disliked. On one hand, he felt privileged to see his shizun this way. On the other, he hated a certain *rat* of a man also got to see it. With another sigh, Shizun added, “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” Liu Qingge grumbled.

At the very least, after the beating they had gotten some explanation. The two had run into each other a few years ago, both realizing that they “transmigrated” into this world. Since then the two had developed some sort of… kinship. To say it was *friendship* would be a step too far – at least, according to Shen Yuan.

Though seeing the way the two harped on another, to call it anything else seemed more like a lie.

Which was… unfortunate.

Luo Binghe found his mood souring again. At the edges of his demonic hearing, he heard a soft yelp and shushing (both by the same person). He focused in on the quiet sounds, and heard a, “My king!” which only confirmed his suspicions. Part of him wondered if Mobei Jun would make himself known, and that part itched for a bloody fight. He wondered if Liu Qingge would join him, or just admire the fight for what it was.

Then he realized that if Mobei Jun showed himself, more than likely Luo Binghe would have to confess to being a demon. His heart froze.

The War God of Bai Zhan *hated* demons. Would that mean he would hate Luo Binghe? As Shizun once had, casting him into the-

A hand draped over his. Luo Binghe stirred from his thoughts, and turned to see his shizun reaching across the counter. He stared up into his eyes, worry creasing his eyebrows together. “Binghe?”

“It’s a lot,” he murmured, hoping that his shizun’s unmatched ability to misinterpret everything would lead him in a direction that favored him. For once.

Shen Yuan’s expression softened. “I know. I’m sorry, Binghe.”

There was a noise on the other side of the kitchen. *Stop apologizing.*

With an exasperated smile, Shen Yuan raised an eyebrow at the war god. He shook his head and squeezed Luo Binghe's hand. Then he withdrew and turned his attention towards the main room. He seemed caught on a thought.

"Peerless Cucumber?" Luo Binghe asked.

In moments, Shen Yuan's ears turned bright with color. He shot him a warning look. "No." Goosebumps ran up Luo Binghe's spine and he fought the urge to smirk with delight. His shizun narrowed his eyes. "Are you done?"

"Yes," Luo Binghe said with a grin. Lifting his voice slightly he added, "Shall we?"

The three of them made their way back into the sitting room. It was not lost on him how Shen Yuan raised his voice, so anyone else might be aware of them approaching, and talked about something called "usernames" and the creation of something called the *internet.* They settled down around the table.

Shang Qinghua popped back out of a room. His hair was in order and his robes a bit more in place as he sat back down. He made a point of nursing his arm that was in the sling, sending a pout Shen Yuan's way. It did not garner him any sympathy.

"Well," Shen Yuan said with a deep breath. He sat, posture pristine, and narrowed his eyes at the squirrely man. "Shen Qingqiu."

"Shen Qingqiu," Shang Qinghua echoed. He tapped his fingers on the table top. "I'm going to be honest, bro. You probably remember him better than I do."

"What happened in the book?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Scum villain got his limbs ripped off," Shang Qinghua said, with a visceral ripping sound. "Pretty deserved, if you ask me, after what he did to you-"

"Shang Qinghua!" Shen Yuan snapped.

"What?!" Shang Qinghua threw his hand into the air. "You didn't tell them *that* either?! Bro. So when you said they *know* everything, you meant that they know *nothing."*

It was hard to follow what dissolved after that. Shen Yuan did not have a fan, but he still seemed capable of using his hands and feet. Luo Binghe stared down at the table, as things pieced together bit by bit.

"I did it?" Luo Binghe asked, because he had to. His stomach was sinking.

Shen Yuan froze.

Jaw tightening, Luo Binghe threw a glare at Shang Qinghua. "It was me?"

"Uh," Shang Qinghua swallowed. He paled and threw a wide-eyed glance between all three of them, trying to decide who was the most dangerous to him. His eyes settled on Luo Binghe and he answered, "Y-Yeah."

Eyes falling shut, Luo Binghe dropped his chin to his chest. His hands squeezed into tight fists. This *entire* time, his shizun thought-

Got his limbs ripped off.

A hand settled on the back of his neck and squeezed. It was his shishu. The heat of his palm helped to fight back some of the worst emotions. Luo Binghe took deep breaths, the tip of his nose prickling with the onslaught of his frustration and tears. “That’s why Shizun ran,” he said, voice breaking. He opened his eyes, staring up at the man who he loved across the table. “Shizun.” That man blurred behind tears. “Shizun, this disciple *wouldn’t-“*

“Oh, Binghe…”

“Shizun, please,” Luo Binghe choked out. “*Yuan-gege.* Please. You know this lowly one wouldn’t do that, right? I-I-“

There was a shuffle of silk, and then arms wrapped around him. “Binghe…” Shen Yuan murmured, pulling his head into his chest. He ran a soothing hand over his hair.

“This beast wouldn’t hurt Shizun,” Luo Binghe clutched onto him. “This beast wouldn’t!”

But he already had.

His parasites flooded Shen Yuan’s body.

He had caused this *entire* situation-

“Binghe wouldn’t hurt Shen Yuan,” Liu Qingge affirmed. He rested a hand on Luo Binghe’s back and rubbed circles between his shoulder blades. His words were spoken with certainty that left no room for argument.

“This master knows now, Binghe,” Shen Yuan murmured, his voice dangerously close to sounding wet. “He knows.” He wrapped his arms tight around him and held him close.

Shen Yuan had stepped into the role of Shen Qingqiu, thinking that his end game was Luo Binghe tearing off his limbs. And still he showed kindness and care. This entire time he expected Luo Binghe to come back and *torture* him, and still he held him. Patted his head. Assured him. Took care of him.

It took time for Luo Binghe to calm down again. He soaked up comfort offered to him on two sides, one in the arms of his shizun and the other given by steady touches on his back and soft murmured assurances. Only after he calmed did the conversation resume.

He didn’t move.

Neither did either of the two on each side of him.

Shang Qinghua covered what happened in his book, and then both he and Shen Yuan went over the mysterious past that made up the original Shen Qingqiu.

It was shocking to hear.

Slave made Immortal Master. There were some details that Shang Qinghua was fuzzy on. He did not have the details on what occurred in the Qiu Household, nor did he even really understand who that woman was who said she knew Shen Qingqiu. It left them with more unknowns and not that much to work with.

At some point, Shen Yuan sighed and pressed his fingers against his temple as if he nursed a headache. With his other hand, he ran his fingers through Luo Binghe's hair. "I can't believe you threw away *all* of that for a flat dimensional scum villain."

"What?" Shang Qinghua threw his hand in the air. "The people didn't *want* dimension, Cucumber-bro! They wanted sex!"

Shen Yuan's hand jerked to a stop.

"Oh, come *on!* Don't give me that look!" Shang Qinghua threw up his arm up to shield his face. "I would have *loved* to develop more of his character, but I was dependent on the readers! And the readers wanted a punching bag, and then some lovely maiden for Bingge to," he made an obscene sound, "Papapa!"

"Please shut up," Shen Yuan said. "Right now."

"Sex pays the bills!" Shang Qinghua cried, attempting to dig himself out of this hole. He only dug himself deeper. "*You* paid for it!"

"*Airplane,"* Shen Yuan said through his teeth.

Luo Binghe choked on a disbelieving laugh. *What?!*

"What." Liu Qingge echoed his thoughts.

Mouth dropping open, Shen Yuan attempted to make some sort of argument for himself. All that came out was a jumbled string of words.

"Oh, sure. You read it for the 'plot'," Shang Qinghua said with quotations

That did it. Shen Yuan slammed a fist onto the table, making everything shake. "Fuck you! I did *not* slog through millions of poorly written sex scenes for *this!"* He shouted, voice raising. "Airplane, your sex scenes are *subpar* at best, I don't think you know how anatomy works-"

Shang Qinghua let out a squawk of protest.

"Read the first one and you got it *all.* But your world building, and the creatures," Shen Yuan grasped the air, as if wanting for something, "*that* can be brilliant. Sometimes." He threw a pointed finger at Shang Qinghua. "Only *sometimes.* That is what I read your shitty stupid novel for. It had the potential of something really fucking good and you wasted it."

Silenced, Shang Qinghua took in a shuddering breath. He stared at him, eyes watering.

Shen Yuan deflated only slightly. His hand nervously snapped to Luo Binghe's hair and his fingers tangled into it. His jaw moved as he caught Liu Qingge watching him out of the corner of his eye, as if he were swallowing an apology.

"Aw, bro," Shang Qinghua said, hand pressed to his chest. "You think I'm brilliant."

"I *hate* you," Shen Yuan hissed through his teeth. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and then he collapsed against the table with his head in his hands. "Ugh."

Luo Binghe realized something about himself. He *really* liked it when Shen Yuan yelled. His eyes drifted away from his shizun, and he gave his shishu a curious glance.

Their eyes met. A blush rose on Liu Qingge's cheeks and he gave a quiet *humph* and turned his head.

Ah, so he wasn't the only one. Luo Binghe extracted himself from the comfort of his shizun's lap and sat up. He wanted to place a hand on his shizun's back and give him some sort of reassurance – that it was *okay* for him to be that way around him. Though he wouldn't dare. After an inward struggle, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, with his head in his hands. He smiled and waited for his shizun to be brave enough to peek out from underneath his hands.

Sensing eyes on him, Shen Yuan peeked. His neck flushed.

"Shizun is amazing," Luo Binghe said, allowing his adoration to flood into each syllable. "Qingge likes it too."

"*Qingge…?"* Shang Qinghua choked quietly to himself.

"Mn," the war god affirmed.

If they spent any more time on this, his shizun would lose too much face. Luo Binghe straightened and turned to address only Liu Qingge and his shizun. "This Binghe has a few ideas on what we need to do next."

Liu Qingge watched him, and nodded for him to continue.

With a conspiring smile, Luo Binghe told them his plans.

Chapter End Notes

in terms of pacing of the story, i believe there will be around 36 chapters total? obviously that count is going to wiggle and change a bit, which is why i haven't updated ao3. we're getting there, folks

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

5.3k this time around, around 23 ish minutes of reading.

I really appreciate all the well wishes and support, I am extremely grateful to everyone! We've officially hit 1k kudos and I am... floored. Thank you everyone. All the comments and support have made me so extremely grateful. Thank you for joining me with the journey of this fic!

Content Warning: very mild panic attack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The only time Shen Qingqiu had ever felt this nervous for a peak lord meeting was when he first transmigrated. He remembered his first time ascending the intimidating steps of Qiong Ding Peak and the terror that echoed with every thundering heartbeat. That day he had hid mostly behind his fan and had tried to pretend cool disinterest. Too bad he wouldn't be able to do the same today. With a straight back, he walked towards the large ornate doors that lead into the meeting hall. In preparation for the meeting, disciples and servants ran in and out. They had to artfully navigate around the few peak lords who dragged their feet up the long steps in hopes of catching sight of Shen Qingqiu. Many eyes bore into him and the two shadows that trailed off to his left and right. Those shadows were the only thing stopping him from turning tail and running. A new fan creaked in his hand. He forced his expression to stay cool and neutral, as if he were not about to step into a hearing and face some of the most powerful individuals in one of the most powerful sects of this world.

Nothing could go wrong, certainly.

Earlier, Shang Qinghua had abandoned him. At the door to his leisure house, he excused himself from the meeting with a wave of his hand and a nervous laugh. "Sorry, bro! As much as I would love to watch you be eviscerated by our sect siblings-"

"They will not," Liu Qingge interrupted, darkly.

"Ah, ha… yeah. Figure of speech, Liu-shidi! Anyways. I, uh, have my own problems to deal with." Under his breath he had added, "Not that you're planning to help…"

Shen Qingqiu almost felt bad. As much as he raved about what Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky getting his just desserts, it was somewhat unsettling to see him so haggard. The two

of them hadn't even discussed what was going on with the System. There was no question Airplane was also being forced back to the other world.

There were multiple unknowns. Was Shang Qinghua's System not tied to Luo Binghe? Was it tied to someone else?

He resolved to track down his fellow transmigrator after all this mess and sit down with him so that they could compare notes and maybe finally figure out a real solution to all of this. If that somehow failed and he couldn't help Airplane-bro here, he at least still had the internet and money to spare in the other realm!

With only a slight pink hue to his skin, Liu Qingge said, "Dual cultivation."

Silence.

Shang Qinghua's eyes widened. "Ah, ha… what?"

More silence.

Liu Qingge scowled deeply, struggling to explain more as his blush deepened.

Sorry, Shidi! You did this to yourself! *You* decided it was a great idea to bring up *that* solution. Shixiong is noping the fuck out of this one. Bye!

"Mu-shishu examined all three of us and suggested dual cultivation would help with repairing the System," Luo Binghe said, dryly.

Ah! What's this? Helping out your shishu?! Since when, Binghe?!!

"...Dual cultivation with… all those affected?" Shang Qinghua cringed, his eyes flicking up to his fellow transmigrator.

Shen Qingqiu's eyes widened. He wished he had a fan to cover the utter disgust on his face.

Nope! Sorry not sorry! Absolutely not!

Eyes darkening dangerously, Luo Bingghe added, "Since your System appears to act autonomously to Shizun's then it is more likely that you would need to dual cultivate with only those affected by *your* System." There was a warning note to his disciple's voice.

"Ah…" Shang Qinghua's shoulders dropped. The revelation of a potential cure did not seem to bring him any hope. "Thanking Liu-shidi and… Luo-shizhi for advice." He stared down at his feet. "If… you come across anything else, ah ha, let this master know…?"

"Who is cursed to Shang Qinghua?" Liu Qingge asked, confusion bending his eyebrow.

Abort! Abort!!

Shang Qinghua paled considerably, mouth flapping uselessly.

Someone vaguely responded, probably. There were hasty goodbyes, the door was shut, and both Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu discussed their next steps before the meeting. Nothing to see here, Liu Qingge!

The War God of Bai Zhan was not amused. Though he did not ask again. He wore a dry expression and followed them in silence instead.

And… now they were here with far too many eyes dissecting them. Not that Shang Qinghua would have been any help in this situation. Maybe it would have been a nice distraction, his shidi showing up to a peak lord meeting with a demon king at his side.

On habit, Shen Qingqiu reached out to the System. A loud noise screamed in the back of his mind and he stiffened.

Liu Qingge was at his side with concern flooding into the depths of his eyes. He raised a single eyebrow as a nonverbal question.

“Fine,” Shen Qingqiu breathed.

Eyebrows softening, his shidi nodded. It was strange to know the war god so well. There was a time that Shen Qingqiu thought his expressions were always just some variation of pissed off. At some point, he had begun to learn the varying degrees beneath his stern and cold visage.

At his other side, Luo Binghe leaned in and said, “Shizun is not alone.” Steel determination burned in his eyes, as if he were ready to raze the sect if need be.

Ah. No, thank you! Shen Qingqiu would like to avoid that outcome, please!

“Thank you, Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said with a quiet smile.

The three of them stepped into the flourish of activity that spun right beyond the open doors to the meeting hall. Voices climbed to the ceiling, with amicable laughter dancing around between friends. Before they stepped in too much further, a light touch on his wrist made Shen Qingqiu pause.

Liu Qingge’s fingers were almost cold. He drew a thumb across the back of his hand, eyes bright as if he were about to plunge into battle. “Not alone,” he reminded him, staring deeply into his eyes.

Ah! Hello?

What was with that serious face!!

Heat rose to Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks, and his fan was there in an instant to shield his reaction. His stomach leaped up into his throat, with his heart wreaking havoc around his ribs. Ah! It was too soon since Liu Qingge teased him by kissing his wrist. What the hell?! He tried not to cringe at the memory. Anyone would have such a reaction! Just look at how beautiful Liu Qingge was! It wasn’t as if Shen Qingqiu was *bent* or anything!

(He… couldn't think about that now. Not *now.)*

The hold slipped away, and Shen Qingqiu's skin ached from the emptiness. His fingers curled and tucked away into his sleeve. He was certain he thanked his shidi. At least, he hoped he didn't just gape like a fool. They split apart, going to their respective seats. Luo Binghe followed Shen Qingqiu to stand behind him.

A few peak lords tried to catch his attention and start a conversation. He forced himself into cold politeness and ruthlessly cut down any probing questions. Eventually the sect leader stepped into the room. He wore fine silks, his hair drawn up in an intricate fashion with a heavy guan atop his head. There was a vacant smile on his expression, belying something heavier underneath. He made it to the head of the table. With only one apologetic glance towards Shen Qingqiu, the meeting started.

The situation was brought forth in a clinical and precise manner. From the start of Jin Lan City to the disastrous end. As soon as the floor opened for questions, Shen Qingqiu was bombarded by them. He stood and sank into his role of the Qing Jing Peak Lord. From over his fan, he was surprised to see more than one encouraging face.

Qi Qingqi led questions around in his favor.

Mu Qingfang stood as both witness and testament to his nature.

Others argued that Shen Qingqiu would never work with demons, especially not after what occurred during the demonic invasion *and* the Immortal Conference!

It seemed that all the preparations he had made with Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge were unnecessary. There were, of course, a handful of devil's advocates and others who remembered the Original Goods far too well. Their voices were not as loud as the others were. Bit by bit he felt himself relax. He had spent years building up his rapport and relations between his fellow martial siblings. The Cang Qiong Sect had his back. It was… nice. More than nice.

The next set of questions brought forth Luo Binghe – the Huan Hua Palace had spun a tale of woe, an abused disciple trying to escape his evil and power hungry master. With a honey-sweet tongue and shining eyes, Luo Binghe completely destroyed that notion. He even gave Shen Qingqiu moon eyes. *Really* selling the act there, protagonist!! Maybe a bit too much?

We don't want anyone to get the wrong idea!!

"What happened during the Immortal Conference?" one of the peak lords asked.

Luo Binghe's shoulders dropped and he turned his head away, "This disciple failed his shizun…" He waited, letting the conversation lapse just long enough to put the other peak lords on the edge of their seats. Even Shen Qingqiu found his gut tightening in anticipation, waiting to hear how his disciple would spin *this* lie. "This one was but a mere youth, determined to prove himself to his shizun, who had placed so much faith in him…"

It was a heartwrenching tale. One that painted Shen Qingqiu a hero. Stepping in, he had valiantly defended the youths partaking in the Immortal Conference and attempted to bring them all to safety. Then a powerful beast had crawled forth from the shadows, looking for blood. Shen Qingqiu had valiantly thrown himself into battle to protect the disciples. He had nearly slain the beast, only to be thwarted when Without-a-Cure acted up. Even crippled, he had fought bravely and determined.

Until everything went wrong.

As Luo Binghe took another dramatic break from his tale, allowing the silence to simmer, everyone remembered how they found Shen Qingqiu: severely wounded and utterly broken. It didn't take much for them to make their own connections, painting the story in a grimmer sense.

"This lowly disciple failed Shizun," Luo Binghe murmured, pain in his eyes. "I-"

Shen Qingqiu rose from his seat, unable to stop himself. "*Binghe,"* he said, discomfort twisting his insides. He couldn't stand it – the repainting of this tale. Not when the truth was so much more horrific. "You did *not* fail this master. He failed you." He was surprised at the emotion in his voice.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe gasped, looking up at him with tears in his eyes.

It was then that Shen Qingqiu realized he had played *right* into Luo Binghe's carefully woven act. Ah. Well. The entire assembly held their breath, hands held over their hearts, at the heartbreaking scene before them.

Flustered, Shen Qingqiu hid behind his fan and he sharply said, *"Enough.* No more of this."

"Indeed," Yue Qingyuan agreed, slowly. There was something off in his expression. "Let's move on."

The weakest part of their argument was the woman. They finally had a name: Qiu Haitang. Her family name was not lost on Shen Qingqiu. The best that he could offer when probed with questions about her was the truth: he did not remember.

His heart went out to the original Shen Qingqiu. The man had worked decades to build up his reputation and to bury his past. Luckily most of the questions focused on the demons and Luo Binghe's treatment. Some brushed uncomfortably close to the past, which was too much like telling a dead man's secrets. It wasn't as if Shen Qingqiu had any heart for the Original Goods or anything. It just felt wrong airing another man's dirty laundry after you had sort of… stolen his body after he died.

By the end of it all, Shen Qingqiu felt strung out and gutted like one of Liu Qingge's kills. The meeting was adjourned, with the Cang Qiong Sect strongly in support of Shen Qingqiu. They had covered what preparations needed to be done upon the imminent arrival of the Huan Hua Palace and the other sects – though they decided to leave specific details off until the next day.

Shen Qingqiu was exhausted.

As others leaked out of the building, he gathered his feet underneath him and wiped away wrinkles from his silks. He waited for Liu Qingge to come around the table. It wasn't until a body stood at his side that he realized the sect leader had stepped up next to him. "Qingqiu," Yue Qingyuan said, speaking quietly. "If you can stay back a moment?"

Unease caused the hairs on Shen Qingqiu's arms to raise. He held his fan in front of him and said, "This shidi can not offer any privacy for Sect Leader Yue." As if to underline his point, both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge stepped up to either side of him.

It was like having two jealous guard dogs. Ah! How nice. If only!!

Yue Qingyuan gave both of them a bland smile. "Liu-shidi. Disciple Luo. This one apologizes, but if there is any way you two might be able to step a little further back…?"

No. Sorry, they can't!

Sighing through his nose, Shen Qingqiu gave both of them a small nod. There was no use running from whatever this conversation was. It was better to have it now before Mu Qingfang forced him to tell the sect leader the truth.

When the other two left, Luo Binghe barely on the edge of respect with his glare, the sect leader turned to Shen Qingqiu. There was a vacant smile on his face. It reminded Shen Qingqiu of a cadaver, painted up and ready for a casket. It made his blood drain from his face.

"How much has Xiao-Jiu forgotten?" Yue Qingyuan asked.

Shen Qingqiu's hand twitched. All at once, his vision faded around the edges and he felt disconnected from himself. He felt his expression twist into a sneer and he said with scolding venom, "Do not call me that."

Eyes lowering, Yue Qingyuan's bland smile broadened. It remained lifeless. "Of course, Qingqiu-shidi. This shixiong apologies." He sighed and looked off to the side. "He also apologizes for… all of this-"

A crack echoed across the hall.

It took Shen Qingqiu staring at his own hand and feeling the sting on his own palm to realize what he had just done.

He had slapped the sect leader.

Yue Qingyuan's head was forcefully turned aside, and he stared in shock at the wall.

Heat filled up Shen Qingqiu's throat and spilled out of him, "That was *humiliating.* What am I? A street performance?" He hissed, anger choking him. "You manage to make so many sounds with that useless mouth of yours and none ever manage to actually have any

meaning. Keep apologizing. Waste your breath. Let all the air bleed from your lungs. Choke on your empty promises. Words from your lips are worth *nothing."*

The blank, dead look had shattered. Yue Qingyuan stared at Shen Qingqiu in disbelief. He stared at him with *hope.*

It was too much. He twisted away with a dramatic flourish of silk and stalked away.

Someone shouted his name and he ignored it. His body was an automated machine that had one destination in mind, and it was moving on its own. Colors, faces, and sounds blurred past him. It wasn't until he stood in front of the door to his Bamboo House that he felt like himself. He could not remember the walk back. His breath was staggered. Heavy.

"...Shizun?"

Shen Qingqiu couldn't look over his shoulder. His hands shook. He pushed inside the Bamboo House. When he reached the main room, a hand caught onto his wrist and twisted him around. Eyes falling shut, he barely stopped himself from throwing himself to the closest pair of arms. He forced a breath from his lungs and said, "I don't know. Before you ask, I don't know."

It wasn't me, he wanted to say, but that possibility terrified him more than anything.

That thought might lead to others. He had run on the assumption that the Original Goods had *died* before he stepped into this body.

If Shen Qingqiu, *the real one,* was-

"Yuan." A warm hand slid over his cheek and cradled his face.

Shen Yuan's eyes opened.

Standing before him with a painfully gentle expression, Liu Qingge watched him. His thumb trailed a feather-light path across his skin, which inspired goosebumps to chase up his spine. "Are you alright?" the war god asked.

It was too much to explain – and saying it aloud might make it true. He swallowed everything down, locking it away, and said, "Yes, Qingge."

A wrinkle formed between Liu Qingge's eyebrows. He didn't believe him. He plucked one of Shen Yuan's hands and pressed it against his chest. It was only in his shidi's steady hold that made him realize how much he was shaking. "Breathe with me," he said, and took in a deep breath. His chest rose with the motion.

Liu Qingge was solid and warm. He was *real.* Shen Yuan stared at his chest. His fingers slid up, trailing across silk.

Real. Not a character. Warm. Breathing. And so incredibly real. Someone who had a life. Someone who had a history and a future. His fingers trailed up further and found warm skin.

There was a mole on his neck. A pulse fluttered underneath his fingertips. Liu Qingge swallowed.

Wherever this all started – if it was just a book or it wasn't – Liu Qingge was *real.* They all were.

Shen Qingqiu was once *real.*

Both of his hands held either side of Liu Qingge's face, fingertips light on his jaw. It moved as his lips parted. Nothing but a soft wisp of air escaped. Then a tongue darted out, wetting his lips.

Shen Yuan felt that fluttering heartbeat quicken underneath his pinky, and watched ivory skin color and heat underneath his hands.

Real. Real. And full of so much life.

And…

Awkwardly allowing him to feel up his face!

Shen Qingqiu snatched back his hands, blinking back to reality. He stood inside the Bamboo House, with his shidi and his disciple. His heartbeat resounded inside his chest. "I…" He cleared his throat. "Liu-shidi, I-"

"No apologies," Liu Qingge interrupted, breathless. He stared down at the space between them, crimson with a blush.

"I think *that* calls for an apology!" Shen Qingqiu protested with a croak.

"No," Liu Qingge met his eyes. "It doesn't."

Shen Qingqiu opened his mouth and his shidi's gaze fell to it. There was a dark look in his eyes.

Shit! Had Shen Qingqiu finally pushed the war god too far!?

Breathing in sharply through his nose, Liu Qingge set his jaw. His hands flexed into fists and he slowly let out a long breath. "Yuan is okay?"

"Yes," Shen Qingqiu murmured, hiding behind his fan again. "Thanking Qingge."

With a nod, the war god glanced towards Luo Binghe. Both of them exchanged a coded look that was completely lost on Shen Qingqiu. "Dinner?" his shidi asked.

"Yes!" Luo Binghe said with a start.

Thankfully, they left behind whatever moment just happened and moved on.

A grand meal spilled out onto the table before them. Shen Qingqiu could have wept. He greedily plucked from several different dishes, letting succulent meats melt on his tongue and inhaled glazed vegetables. He was in heaven. No restrictions on food! No worrying about medicine! Other than Without-a-cure, of course, but he was ignoring that at the moment.

Across the table, Liu Qingge no longer attempted to smother any of his smiles. It was a gift in itself. The man was quite beautiful. He sensed Shen Qingqiu's attention and looked up at him from underneath a set of dark eyelashes. The man was already dangerously attractive with a scowl. When he smiled, it made him quite breathtaking.

(Oh, no.)

Luo Binghe beamed, practically glowing from the unsaid praise at the silent dinner table. Mouths were too preoccupied with food to give any comment. Happiness suited him well. It brought out the warmth in his skin, and made lights dance in his eyes. He, being the protagonist, was also incredibly handsome! He no longer had the rounded cheeks of a youth, and instead had sharp cheekbones and a strong jaw. His lips were full and soft-

(Oh… no.)

Clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu set down his chopsticks and let his hands rest in his lap. Two pairs of eyes slid to him. "Now we just have to make preparations for the arrival of the Huan Hua Palace. We should have some time – at the very least, a week." He looked over at his disciple and said, "Thanking Binghe for all of his hard work in this endeavor."

"We will make sure they don't imprison you, Shizun," Luo Binghe said. It sounded like a vague threat towards the other sects.

"Mn," Liu Qingge agreed. As he finished his part of the meal, he set it aside. His posture was always pristine, even as his shoulders slumped from his exhaustion. He had bounced back from his nap earlier, but it seemed the entire day caught up to him. His eyelids looked especially heavy.

Cute!

(*...shit.)*

Ignoring the way his heart flopped around, Shen Qingqiu clapped his hands together and said, "Time for bed then?"

No one helped Luo Binghe with the dishes; he shooed them off if they tried. They all wandered inside the kitchen, and Liu Qingge did his best to remain standing as he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed.

"I suppose this means we will be sleeping together for the first time," Shen Qingqiu said aloud, tapping his fan against his chin.

Two pairs of suddenly very awake eyes snapped to him.

Shen Qingqiu continued, “In this world, that is.” Heat rose to his cheeks. What!? They were all men!! What was the problem with that?! “If either of you are uncomfortable, we can find some sleeping mats.”

There were a few beats where no one said anything. Then Luo Binghe cheerfully said, “We already shared a bed, Shizun. This disciple sees no issue doing so again.”

“This bed is smaller,” Shen Qingqiu reminded him.

Liu Qingge’s mouth opened and shut. His glower deepened as he glared down at the floorboards. “Fine.”

It was normal! Why were the two of them making such a big deal out of it?

Shen Qingqiu ignored the way his pulse was quickening.

Normally after dinner, there were a few hours of uninterrupted peace for Shen Qingqiu to work or lay back and fall into a book. He loved the softening of the world as it drifted into the night. As much as he yearned for that, all he could think about was hitting the bed and knocking out. He was certain Liu Qingge felt the same.

Dishes were cleaned, and not before long all of them were inside his bedroom. Well. Almost. Two bodies stood at the entryway, as if stuck behind some sort of barrier. With an endeared huff, Shen Qingqiu shook his head and began the process of getting ready for bed. Was it really that bad, sharing a bed with this old man?!

Please. To think the two of them had offered a *cure!*

(*Don’t think about that!)*

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe said, voice rough and low. His dark eyes were heady. “Let this disciple help?”

Ah! His little perfectionist. He must hate the way that Shen Qingqiu was handling his silks! His overrobe was cast aside on a nearby chair, and his belt hung over it.

“If Binghe wants,” Shen Qingqiu said with a nod.

Luo Binghe stepped into the room with an anxious swallow. He drifted over. Long fingers, trembling slightly, dragged along the collar of Shen Qingqiu’s robe and slid down along the lip of the fabric. The first tie caught his fingertips, and he tugged at the strings until the knot unwound. He sought the next tie. It came undone. And then the next. His hands were careful and reverent, as if he were conducting some sort of prayer.

As the first layer fell open, Luo Binghe stepped behind Shen Qingqiu and rested his hands on his shoulders. He leaned in close, lips next to his ear, as he murmured, “This disciple will care for Shizun.”

At the doorway, Liu Qingge watched. His dark eyes glimmered, fingers twitching at his sides.

Fabric glided off Shen Qingqiu's shoulders with Luo Binghe's guiding hands. He gathered the silk in his arms, and moved to put it away.

It left Shen Qingqiu feeling more naked than he should, and that had been only one layer! He had at least four more! Liu Qingge's voice was in the back of his mind: *Different rules.* He hoped his blush wasn't as obvious as it felt.

Come *on!* His disciple was just being helpful.

The next few layers were almost excruciating. Luo Binghe continued with the tenderly slow pace. Sparks ignited wherever his fingers brushed or pressed. The war god did not move from the entrance. His hands had folded into fists.

By the time Shen Qingqiu was dressed for bed, he was more than happy for the excuse to sit. His skin was on fire. In the mirror, he saw that his shidi had finally stepped into the room. The door closed behind him. His face was red and he twitched, eyes magnetized to the two of them.

"Does Shishu want to help Shizun with his hair?" Luo Binghe asked.

Liu Qingge startled. He glanced between both of them. His eyes met Shen Qingqiu.

Throat tight, Shen Qingqiu dipped his head giving quiet permission. Just bros helping other bros getting ready for bed! That was all this was!! His shidi stepped forward and switched places with Luo Binghe. The war god wasn't necessarily known for being *gentle,* but he surprised Shen Qingqiu. He took out his hair ornamentation, trembling only slightly at first.

Poor Shidi! You must be so tired!!

When the last piece was set on the vanity, Liu Qingge took the brush and started to run it through his hair. His touch was gentle, with just enough pressure on his scalp to be relaxing. Shen Qingqiu's eyes fell shut.

Behind him, he heard the shuffling of more silk. Luo Binghe undressing. His fingers curled, and blunt nails dug into the palms of his hands. It was normal! All of them would sleep in their inner robes. What was the problem with that!?

(Fuck.)

Shen Qingqiu's mouth was dry and he was having a hard time swallowing. It was hard to relax again. His eyes cracked open when he heard a soft, "Would Liu-shishu like some help?"

A complicated expression twisted Liu Qingge's face. He considered the back of Shen Qingqiu's head, then nodded once. His skin was permanently stained with a blush.

Shen Qingqiu did not mean to watch them through the reflection of the mirror, but he was captivated. Was this how it had looked, with him and…? There was something tangibly intimate about the way Luo Binghe undressed his shishu. Every single step was executed with adoring care. There was a dark look in Liu Qingge's steel eyes.

Heat coiled in the pit of Shen Qingqiu's stomach. Fabric was knotted in his hands. Every breath was accompanied by a resounding heartbeat. His face flushed.

Layers spilled off of Liu Qingge, chasing away the severity of his form. He softened into something new in just the thin layers of his inner robes. He was alluring, cheeks reddened and lips parted. An indescribable hunger darkened his eyes as he watched Luo Binghe put away the last layers of his robes.

(*…oh.)*

"This Binghe can also help Liu-shishu with his hair…?" Luo Binghe offered, watching his shishu through the dark fan of his lashes. Then his eyes slid over to Shen Qingqiu, meeting them in the mirror. "Unless Shizun would like to?"

Shen Qingqiu sat up, feeling guilty at being caught staring. A denial hung on his tongue, and he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to deny. Then it hit him. Like a pail of luke-warm water sliding over him, shame cascaded through him. He was having a *reaction.*

What. What the *fuck?!?!*

Heat curled and throbbed in his gut. He became painfully aware of certain parts of his own anatomy, along with the thin layers that did *nothing* to hide it.

Sirens started blaring in his mind.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK.

WHAT.

"Shizun?" Luo Binghe cocked his head, his dark curls falling over his shoulder.

"B-Binghe can handle it," Shen Qingqiu croaked. What he really wanted to do was run out of the room. Except that he really didn't want to deal with the fucking agony of stepping too far from Luo Binghe. On the other hand, it might help kill his-

It would help with his… *reaction.*

Right?

(*It fucking better. If he started to develop a thing for pain on top of-)*

"Blankets," he said, throwing himself from the chair. He swept out of the room, with only weak sounds of protest behind him.

What the fuck.

What.

Shen Qingqiu was straight. What the *hell* was going on? Was it simply the protagonist's aura!? He swept straight towards where he kept extra linens, trying to escape the thoughts that chased his heels.

Now was *not* the time to have a fucking *identity crisis!*

As he threw open the cabinet door, he stared at the folded blankets. It was fine. It had just… been a while since he had some time to himself. That was all. And *anyone* would have that reaction to seeing such beautiful people undress! *Anyone!!* It wasn't like he was-

There's no way he was-

"Shizun?"

Shen Qingqiu sprung up, startled. He should have noticed that no pain followed him with his escape. He haphazardly grabbed blankets and turned towards his disciple. "Blankets," he said, like a fucking moron.

Worry pressed a wrinkle between Luo Binghe's eyebrows. His eyes scoured over Shen Qingqiu's face. He wanted to reach up and rub that wrinkle away.

(...)

"For the bed," Shen Qingqiu continued, "to sleep." His mouth kept running. "There wasn't enough. For us. The three of us? Because…"

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe leaned in. He smelled like Shen Qingqiu's soap – like the bath they all shared. Like home. Like… "This disciple doesn't want you to get hurt. Next time we need something, we can go together."

"It…" Shen Qingqiu's throat dried. He stopped himself from uselessly tacking on "blankets" and closed his mouth.

"Come on." Liu Qingge stole the blankets from him, sweeping out from seemingly nowhere. He turned and headed back towards the bedroom.

"Is Shizun alright?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Fine," Shen Qingqiu said, too quickly. He ignored the way his face heated, and he escaped past his disciple and pretended to have some dignity. Whatever just happened – that was a fluke. Nothing more.

Just a hiccup.

Just-

At the doorway, Luo Binghe caught him. He hesitated for only half a second. Then he reached up, pushing a strand of Shen Qingqiu's hair behind his ear. His dark eyes held a

world of emotions, each lost on Shen Qingqiu. “Shizun is sure?”

For a horrifying second, Shen Qingqiu wondered if his internal dilemma had become a mindless rant.

Then he realized his disciple was asking if he was *okay.*

“Fine, Binghe! Fine,” Shen Qingqiu said, catching his hand. “It’s fine. I just… remembered blankets. That’s all.” *I am not some maiden!! Don’t do that! You’ll give this old man heart palpitations!*

“If Shizun is sure,” Luo Binghe spoke so low the reverberations of his voice rang in Shen Qingqiu’s chest.

They were too close.

Too close!

When did Luo Binghe get so tall?! Ah!

With a tight smile, Shen Qingqiu patted his disciple’s (thick) chest and squeezed back into his bedroom.

Everything was *fine!!*

It was fine!

(*…fuck!)*

Chapter End Notes

Also, apologies, there won't be any hidden demon kings... yet. I am planning a one-shot that covers SQH's side of things, if you're curious. I'll link it as soon as it is done.

Hmmm.... if you squint really hard, you can see.... some set up for something else too....

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

4.5k words, 20 ish minutes reading time.

Ahhhhhhhhh hi. this chapter turned out to be a little long, so I split it into two. The second part will be posted tomorrow! my brain is a little mush so please forgive any typos! happy holidays everyone, and happy new year!

I'm working on comments <3 your comments make me so happy. thank you so much for your support!

Content Warning: the Luo Binghe special, i.e. self-hate, a child "running away from home," bad home life?, talks of not wanting to have a child.

Something had spooked Shen Qingqiu. The man no longer looked either Luo Binghe or the war god in the eye. The rest of their time getting ready for bed was completely silent. In little to no time, the three of them were squished together in bed. Shizun laid on his side, so close to the edge that a small wind might make him teeter off the edge.

Luo Binghe shared one glance with his shishu. Neither seemed to really *know* what was going on inside Shen Qingqiu's head. Withholding a sigh, Luo Binghe stared up at the ceiling. For years he had imagined what it might be like to finally share a bed with his shizun. A bulk of those wishes were a little less than proper – but he had never imagined it to be like *this*. Distant and stiff.

He lay in the middle. On his right side, the war god's shoulder pressed against his own. He could feel Liu Qingge twitch as he forced himself to get used to the contact. Luo Binghe never thought he could be so lonely, surrounded by the two men that meant so much to him. Exhaling through his nose, he set his hand over his own heart and felt the resounding beat echo in his ears. His eyes fell shut.

Slipping into the dream realm was comfortable and familiar. It was something he did without much thought anymore. Like knowing to lift a door ever so slightly so it slid shut with little resistance. Or knowing how hard to swing a cabinet door to make it close. The dream realm was another home. It was a place he was in full control, where his nightmares no longer dared to show their face. As he transformed the realm around him, he sank into the comfort of absolute dominion. Wooden boards clicked into place, walls rose around him, and soon he stood in an exact replica of the Bamboo House. He stared out a window, at a world so

familiar to him. He had used this place in the Abyss to keep himself sane. Peaceful warmth cascaded around him and eased the tension in his shoulders.

He waited.

In the waking world, his shizun shifted uncomfortably. His legs rubbed together as his feet slid against his sheets. He was restless. On the other side of the bed, Liu Qingge attempted to discipline himself into stillness. His muscles twitched and his fingers drummed impatiently on the mattress.

Time crawled. Luo Binghe waited longer. Then he became impatient. He slowly tugged at their consciousnesses, guiding them into the comforting embrace of sleep. Their minds settled, and their breaths slowly eased. Now it was time to get to work. He did not have the intention of prying – as much as he wanted to – and attempted to put some limit on himself. He had a goal. But... if that goal made him *stumble* across some discoveries, well….

He was just trying to be helpful.

Shen Qingqiu was first. Really, Luo Binghe's intention was to locate the traces of the System to first understand how deep its perverted reach went. He intended to give his shizun his privacy. Now that the entity was injured, it struggled to hide its presence. It left traces like a bleeding animal. He followed its trail, getting angrier by the second. The vile leach rooted itself into his shizun's consciousness and threaded itself into his meridians.

As he followed a broken shard of power, he stepped inside of a dream. He planned to ignore it, until he heard the strangled sound of someone trying to smother a sob. The scene unfolded around him: artificially spaced trees, concrete walkways, with a blur of bodies running around on some sort of plastic equipment. Luo Binghe looked up and saw the towering signs of metal buildings and knew that he was in the other realm.

Another smothered sniffle tugged his attention. He could not stop his foot from involuntarily lurching towards the sound. In the few years he had known his shizun, he had never seen so much as a true saddened frown from the man. At least not until this entire debacle started, when he showed up in the hospital that first time. Even then, his shizun had quickly wiped away all traces of his sorrow and the two never discussed it again.

There was a large body of water that glittered through a crowd of trees. A pathway followed the circumference of it. In its own little nook, cut off from everything else, was a little sitting area. There, all alone, was a child. The boy curled into a small ball on an old bench with his arms tying his knees to his chest. His face was buried to muffle his sobs.

This child was Shen Yuan. Luo Binghe's heart sank. He knew he should walk away, to fold the dream into something nicer and move on. He couldn't. His feet took him to the bench, and he sat.

The noise startled the child, and he ripped his arms away and sat up. Even as a youth, disciplined grace dictated every single one of Shen Yuan's movements. He blinked up at Luo Binghe, eyelashes wet with his tears. "Are you Luo Binghe!?" the youth cried. Wonder lit his expression, and any traces of his tears evaporated.

Luo Binghe froze, startled by the pure unadulterated *wonder* that lit Shen Yuan's eyes. The boy looked up at him with eager excitement. He had just enough propriety not to launch himself at Luo Binghe, but his hands clenched at his sides as if he wanted to.

"It's really you! That's *so* cool! You look *awesome!!* You're so tall!! Where's Xin Mo?! Are you trapped?" the boy continued, examining Luo Binghe's robes. He cocked his head to the side. "If you're trying to blend in, you're not doing a good job. Ah! But you've hidden your zuiyin so maybe…"

"You know me?" Luo Binghe interrupted with a smile.

"Yes!" Shen Yuan exclaimed. "I do! I read all about you!"

"You did?" Luo Binghe asked. He ignored the way his eyes burned, with his throat clenching. His shizun… was really too cute. The boy vibrated with enthusiasm – and it was all for meeting *him.*

"It was a stupid book," the youth said with a frown, which looked more like a pout. "You deserved way better than what that stupid author wrote!" He took in a breath to rant, and then deflated a moment later. Confusion filled his expression. "Why are you here?"

"This Binghe is on a mission," Luo Binghe told him, gently.

"For one of your wives?" Shen Yuan asked. "I don't remember anything about Binghe going to *our* realm…" He frowned. His confusion would wake him, if Luo Binghe wasn't careful.

"This Binghe doesn't know of any books, but he is here for someone who he cares about deeply," Luo Binghe told the youth.

"Ah! This must be some stupid extra, or something," Shen Yuan said with an irritated frown.

"Must be," Luo Binghe agreed, expression softening. There were some traces of dried tears on his shizun's cheeks. He wanted to reach out and cradle his face. He stopped. Scouring his mind, he came up with a meager plan. "Can Xiao-Yuan help this Binghe?"

"Yes!" Shen Yuan said eagerly, practically vibrating in his seat. "Of course!" Underneath his breath, he added, "*I get to help the protagonist!! So cool!"*

"First… why was Xiao-Yuan crying?" Luo Binghe asked, his throat tight.

The expression on Shen Yuan's face shuddered. He turned away, and his shoulders slumped. "That doesn't matter."

"It matters to this one," Luo Binghe told him, voice gentle. He hesitantly reached out and laid a hand on the boy's back. He was so fragile and small.

"How will this help with your mission?" Shen Yuan asked, looking miserable. He leaned into Luo Binghe's touch, even as he turned his head away.

“...this one needs someone strong to help him,” Luo Binghe said, coming up with a lie, “but they can’t have any heart demons. You are very strong, Xiao-Yuan. This Binghe wants to help you with your heart demons so you can help him.”

“You should find someone else,” Shen Yuan murmured. His voice started to sink into misery. “I’m not strong. I just cause trouble for other people.” His hands clutched his pants.

“That can’t be true,” Luo Binghe said, “Xiao-Yuan is the strongest. This Binghe needs him.”

“I am not!” Shen Yuan shouted, shoulders curling up to his ears. “Momma doesn’t want another baby because of me! She won’t stop crying because of me! It’s all my fault! Binghe needs to find someone stronger! Someone who-” His voice caught and he bit his lower lip as his body trembled with a sob. He took in a deep breath through his nose, fighting back his tears.

“Xiao-Yuan,” Luo Binghe murmured, his eyes hot and heavy with his own tears. “You do *not* cause trouble. You are the strongest person I know.” He reached out, uncertain of what to do, when Shen Yuan surprised him.

The boy turned and fell into his arms and clutched onto the front of his robes. He buried his face in Luo Binghe’s chest.

Instantly, Luo Binghe caught him. His mind swam in a haze of disbelief, as his shizun sank into it his arms and sobbed. He wrapped his arms around the youth and tucked him in. His cheek rested against the top of his head, and he soothed him with soft murmured words. “Xiao-Yuan is not a burden,” he said. “You are good. You are strong. This Binghe needs you.”

It took some time for Shen Yuan’s tears to ease. Eventually his shoulders stopped shaking, and the hold on the front of Luo Binghe’s robes eased.

Luo Binghe was shocked to find that it was no longer a child in his arms. Instead it was Shen Yuan, the man who he had first met in that hospital room, who curled into his hold. His heartbeat thudded.

“This is a strange dream,” Shen Yuan muttered.

With his shizun in his arms, Luo Binghe was too afraid to speak. He didn’t want this moment to end. His shizun had his head pressed against his chest, no doubt listening to the heavy hammer of his heart.

“I wanted to bring you here,” Shen Yuan said, turning to stare out at the lake. “To show you. I thought you would like it. You always liked the places in the bamboo grove where it seemed like no one else existed. You were most comfortable there.”

One of Luo Binghe’s hand rested at the small of Shen Yuan’s waist. He did not want to move. His skin prickled with heat; he was very aware of where their bodies pressed together. He felt his shizun’s chest fill with air as he took a deep breath.

“When I was young… I thought if I ran away it would make my family happier,” Shen Yuan said. “I thought I could build myself a little home here, at the edge of the lake. I barely lasted an hour before I was hungry and started crying. My da-ge found me. He didn’t drag me back home. We sat here instead and watched the birds fly over the lake.” He wiped some wrinkles out of Luo Binghe’s robes, straightening them where he had crumpled them. “When I was ready to go home, my da-ge took my face into his hands and told me, ‘Next time didi wants to run away, he should bring da-ge too. Da-ge is useless without his didi. He needs him.’”

Shen Yuan let out a long sigh, and sank further into Luo Binghe’s hold with his head tucked under his chin. He continued, “I… love that memory. I think about it every time I come here. It’s my spot. A safe space for me.” He looked up at Luo Binghe, thoughtful. “And I wanted to bring you here.”

Heart pounding, Luo Binghe swallowed. He stared into the depths of his shizun’s eyes, enchantingly dark pools that lured him in.

“I should have known… then,” Shen Yuan said with a frown. He sat up, extracting himself out of the embrace, to stare into Luo Binghe’s eyes. “Why… do I want to…?” He muttered to himself. “Is this a dream?”

Unable to speak, Luo Binghe nodded.

With that confirmation, Shen Yuan cupped Luo Binghe’s face in his hands. His thumbs dragged little circles around his cheeks. Then he leaned in. His eyes fluttered shut. He kissed him.

It was warm and soft, as gentle as the flutter of a butterfly’s wing.

Disbelief dulled Luo Binghe’s mind. The top of his scalp tingled. Warmth blossomed in his chest and exploded outwards, drenching down through his body. Before he could react, his shizun pulled back and considered Luo Binghe. He looked like he was untangling a mystery. “I…” Shen Yuan muttered, his thumb gliding across Luo Binghe’s lower lip. “I want to do that again.”

“Please,” Luo Binghe begged.

A pleased curl quirked the corner of Shen Yuan’s lips. He almost looked smug. It was a good look on him. He leaned in again, his eyes falling shut. This time, Luo Binghe did not hold back. He caught his shizun in his hands and greedily pulled him close. He had imagined for years what it would be like to kiss this man. As a youth he traced his own lips, envisioning what it might be like to feel the press of another’s. His skin ached and yearned. His mouth tingled for a taste.

Shen Yuan grunted and sternly caught the back of Luo Binghe’s head. He tugged his hair to force his head to tilt.

Their mouths slotted together. Luo Binghe was eager and chased after his shizun – but he had no clue what he was doing. His shizun seemed to. (Never mind the jealous thoughts of his shizun kissing anyone else other than his shishu.)

Maybe to get a better angle, or maybe just to get closer, Shen Yuan slid into Luo Binghe's lap.

The world blanked out.

Luo Binghe was nothing but an errant leaf, fully at the mercy of Shen Yuan's winds. Body heat surrounded him. Thighs clamped around his waist. He was certain if his shizun's body wasn't weighing him down, he might have floated away.

Hands clamped down on either side of Luo Binghe's head, forcing him to move into another angle and-

Ah.

Luo Binghe's stomach flipped.

His shizun was good at this. He was *really* good at this.

Tears slid down Luo Binghe's cheeks. He had wanted this for so long, *so long,* and now-

Shen Yuan broke away. He stared at Luo Binghe in bewilderment. "Holy shit," he said, staring at him wide-eyed. "I think I'm gay."

The dream collapsed around them, and in an instant Luo Binghe was thrown out of his shizun's consciousness. In the waking world, Shen Qingqiu sprung up in bed with a gasp. He quickly quieted himself, hands clamping down around his mouth.

Luo Binghe lay in stunned silence. His shizun kissed him. His shizun had *wanted* to kiss him. At least... he had wanted to in a dream. With extreme care, he forced himself not to react. He considered springing up and following the kiss in the real world, and quickly decided that it wasn't a good idea. Whatever discovery his shizun just made while dreaming, he needed time.

Unfortunately.

It took the will of a god not to sit up and ask his shizun what that was about. He had a feeling if he chased after that dream, it would push Shen Qingqiu too far and he would run. It was extremely hard not to move and trace his lips with his fingers. Even harder not to grab onto his shizun and hold him close. His heart pounded so heavily, he thought that it echoed.

"Oh no," Shen Qingqiu whispered. "*Oh no…"*

Luo Binghe left his shizun to his own revelations, and sank away from the waking world. As much as he wanted to pressure his shizun, he felt as if he owed him this moment of privacy. He swept through the dream realm, reaching out for sleeping minds. It was easy to find his shishu. Luo Binghe brought himself to the edges of the man's consciousness. To his startled delight, Liu Qingge was dreaming of the three of them together and drinking tea. His shishu sat with his hands curled around a steaming cup, face soft and full of adoration as both Luo Binghe and Shen Qingqiu conversed. His expression was fully unguarded.

For a while, Luo Binghe let his heart settle as he watched. Liu Qingge was so sweet, listening attentively to both Luo Binghe and his shixiong. He looked utterly smitten.

The dream was cute… but it didn't do much to serve Luo Binghe's purposes. He pulled his shishu further into sleep, and gently rearranged a few threads. Now the three of them were not having tea, but on a nighthunt. The war god's own excitement for the hunt and upcoming battle practically formed the dream itself.

Before the ground even finished forming, Liu Qingge was fighting. Both he and a dream version Luo Binghe shot forward, swords at the ready. They were a blur of movement as they worked in seamless harmony – they fought *together,* not against another. Everything else filtered in piece by piece. Trees raised over their heads, a beast snarled and dodged away from the swing of their swords, and the moon rose high into the sky.

The beast snapped a pair of powerful jaws towards the dream Luo Binghe, who dodged effortlessly. He threw out a powerful kick, which flung the beast straight into the war god's sword.

Was this how Liu Qingge saw him? Graceful and powerful? It was hard to believe. The two had barely brushed into another when hunting for sowers. His heart was heavy in his chest and he realized that he *wanted* this. He wanted to fight beside the war god and to move together in tandem with him.

The beast did not last with the two of them working together. It was near effortless. As the beast drew its last breath and collapsed, Shen Qingqiu clapped from his place underneath a tree. He sat like a fine piece of drapery, legs crossed at the ankles.

Liu Qingge and dream Luo Binghe turned to head back over to their little picnic with Shizun.

The smile that dream Shizun threw their way was bright and brilliant. He commended the two of them on their hard work, and excitedly rambled about the particulars of the beast. Liu Qingge preened at the praise.

With a little spur of intention, Luo Binghe planted his first experiment.

The treeline shuttered, and Sha Hualing stepped out into their small clearing. The calm shattered. Liu Qingge's face turned cold and hard, eyes dark and threatening. He had Cheng Luan in hand, braced for a fight. His free hand grabbed onto dream Luo Binghe's robes and pushed him behind him.

Ah. He was… protecting him?

In an instant, Liu Qingge threw himself at Sha Hualing. He was a blur of lethal fury.

Luo Binghe's heart dropped. His shishu hadn't even given the demon the chance to explain herself. With a deep breath, he reigned the dream back and he tried again. This time, he had Shen Qingqiu say, "Ah, did you hear that?"

All three of them turned to the edge of the clearing, where Sha Hualing stumbled forward. She was the youthful version of herself and heavily wounded. She breathed heavily, nursing her side, as she collapsed to the ground.

This time, Liu Qingge did not launch himself at her. He still guided the dream Luo Binghe to stand behind him, acting as a shield. He showed no sympathy. “Leave.”

“P-Please,” Sha Hualing said, eyes wet as she looked up at him.

Liu Qingge did not budge. He held Cheng Luan as a silent promise that if Sha Hualing were to make a single move towards them that he would end her.

Dread started to pierce into Luo Binghe’s lungs. He reset the scene again. And again. No matter what iteration he tried – the demon broken and bleeding, begging for help, or Shen Qingqiu pleading on her behalf – Liu Qingge was apathetic. He attacked in most cases, chasing Sha Hualing off when she overstayed her welcome.

Luo Binghe had *known* his shishu’s hatred for demons.

It still hurt.

Throat tight, he reset the scene entirely. He brought them back to the sect, on a calm outdoor walk on Qing Jing peak. Dream Shen Qingqiu started talking about some sort of demonic creature, asking if Liu Qingge had ever come across one. His shishu answered. He spoke more in dream rather in real life, piecing together sentences with ease. His eyes were warm as he watched the fascination grow on his shixiong’s face. It was nice listening to the two of them.

Unfortunately, Luo Binghe had plans.

Ahead of them, Yue Qingyuan stepped out from the bamboo trees. He said, “There is something this shixiong must tell you.”

The warmth evaporated from Liu Qingge at once. He took half a step in front of Shen Qingqiu.

“What is it, Zhangmen-shixiong?” Shen Qingqiu asked, hiding behind a fan.

Yue Qingyuan went on some half-assed monologue about impending changes, new arrays, or whatever dream logic wished to fill in as to *why* this was happening. It wasn’t the best work from Luo Binghe, but he was growing desperate. At the end of his long monologue, Yue Qingyuan let “his mask drop” and revealed himself as a demon.

A soft grunt left Liu Qingge. His eyes narrowed dangerously and he threw himself forward. Cheng Luan summoned into his awaiting palm, and he sliced his sect leader without a moment’s hesitation.

The sect leader retreated and dodged. “Liu-shidi, please! I promise you I mean no harm-”

There was a dismissive snort from the war god.

“Shidi, *please,* just listen to me-”

The War God of Bai Zhan did not.

It didn’t seem to matter that the sect leader was not fighting back, merely dodging and defending himself. Nothing he said appeased his shidi. Luo Binghe watched the display with his eyes stinging. He would never be able to tell Liu Qingge the truth. Not if this was the outcome. With a dejected sigh, he nudged his shishu’s dreams back to the Bamboo House. Then he let go.

He let himself float for a few moments, in a space between dreams. His throat was swollen with frustration and there was a hollow ache in his heart. He was aware of the bodies that lay on either side of him. The rhythmic sounds of their breaths both soothed and pained him. He was only partially aware of the tears that wet his cheeks. His jaw tightened.

It wasn’t *fair.*

He hadn’t chosen to be a demon. He didn’t choose *any* of this.

As much as he wanted to wallow in his despair, he didn’t. That wasn’t who he was. Luo Binghe – he didn’t give up. Not when he lost his mother. Not when his shizun cast him into the Abyss. And he wouldn’t give up now. There had to be a way to convince his shishu that he was worthy of his trust.

First he had to figure out how to be *worthy.*

He would be good enough. He would figure it out. Even if it meant forever locking that part of himself away forever, even if it meant-

A hand touched the side of his face in the waking world. Someone softly murmured in his ear, and a thumb cleaned some of his tears. Luo Binghe startled awake to his shizun leaning over him with worry clear on his face.

“Binghe?” Shen Qingqiu murmured, fatigue roughing his voice into a soothing rumble. There was a clear question in his eyes as he cupped the side of Luo Binghe’s face.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe whispered, his heart swelling in his chest.

“Oh, Binghe,” his shizun soothed. “What is it? A bad dream?” He sank back onto his pillow, laying on his side so he could reach up and run a hand over his hair. Even if it wasn’t one, Luo Binghe took it as an invitation. He rolled over. A shocked noise escaped Shen Qingqiu’s as he was flatted to the bed, with Luo Binghe throwing his arms around him and smothering his face in his chest. His shizun squirmed, legs rubbing together, and he admonished, “B-Binghe!”

The two were only in their inner robes – there wasn’t a lot between them, which Luo Binghe suspected where a bulk of his shizun’s embarrassment came from. For once, he wasn’t thinking about anything untoward. He just *needed* this.

After a few moments of flustered silence, Shen Qingqiu sighed. He hesitantly wrapped his arms around Luo Binghe. One hand ran down the back of his head, and the other clamped over his lower back. It secured him. It was exactly what he needed.

“Don’t… don’t throw this disciple away,” Luo Binghe pleaded. “This one will try better. He will learn-”

“*Binghe,”* Shen Qingqiu’s arms tightened. “Hush… you do *not* need to be better.” His fingers knotted into his hair, and he rested his cheek against the top of his head. “This master is sorry… this master did not want to throw Binghe away.”

Thorns grew on the inside of his throat. He clung on to his shizun. He didn’t respond, and instead melted into a puddle of selfish greed.

“...is it Xin Mo?” Shen Qingqiu whispered.

It… might be. Or it might just be the demons that lived within his heart. Xin Mo’s voice was quieter now. It lived, as it possibly always would, in the back of his head. Though now its power was such a distant echo that Luo Binghe didn’t think that this particular influx of emotions came from the sword. He didn’t answer and closed his eyes. He stamped away his thoughts, one by one, until he became nothing but the rise and fall of his shizun’s breaths and the rhythm of his heart.

The silence stretched out long enough that Luo Binghe almost fell back asleep. Underneath him, Shen Qingqiu drew in a breath and paused, as if tasting the words on his tongue before he said them aloud. “You are not unwanted…” he murmured, “Who you are, all that you are, is all that you need to be.”

It was the same thing Liu Qingge had said to his shizun in the other world. To hear those words, directed at *him,* with arms around him-

“S-Shizun,” Luo Binghe choked. He wanted to believe them.

“This master will never throw you away again,” Shen Qingqiu promised. His arms tightened. It felt… possessive. And intoxicating.

(Never mind about not having untoward thoughts.)

There was some movement behind him. Liu Qingge rolled over. By his grumble, he was only half awake. His hand found Luo Binghe’s side and he squeezed. “Sleep,” he demanded, his rough voice hitting Luo Binghe somewhere low.

That part of him was *not* thinking about sleeping.

Not with that hand there.

With a deep breath, Luo Binghe forced himself to push those thoughts away. He smiled into his shizun’s chest. Being the ever-so-obediant disciple, he pulled all three of them into dreams. Even if he could never be *himself* with his shishu, at the very least he had him. In his shizun’s arms, with his shishu behind him, he felt a little less lonely.

He would figure out how to be better.

He *would* be better.

For them.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Another 4.5k words, 20 ish minute reading time.

Warning!! this chapter ends in a big cliff hanger. The next few chapters will leave a lot of uncertainties - but I assure you that there *is* a happy ending for this fic. We're getting into the "hurt" portion of the hurt/comfort fic. If you rather wait for this portion of the arc to be fully out, I recommend waiting until Chapter 27. The next few weeks are going to hurt... just a little bit.

Next time I see you guys, it will be in the new year! thank you everyone for your continued support and understanding <3 I hope everyone is taking it easy this holiday season.

Content Warning: Self-worth issues, the Luo Binghe special, self-hatred, manipulation, cliff hanger.

Early morning light leaked in through the window. Luo Binghe drifted back to the waking world with his legs tied. He lay on his back with a face smothered in his chest. He was in heaven. Throughout the night, he had some vague recollection of their bodies reordering and flopping about (mainly Shen Qingqiu) yet he hadn't paid too much attention to it. Most of his attention lay on tracking down all the little threads of the entity that trespassed within both of his shizun's and shishu's bodies. As awareness flooded back to him, he tried to get an understanding of how he had become a humanoid knot with his shizun. Somehow (read: woefully) Liu Qingge had stayed out of it.

There was an arm trapped underneath Luo Binghe's back. It wasn't the most comfortable thing, and he suspected that arm had long since gone numb. He hadn't been the one tossing and turning in the night, but he was the one with his robe untied and open. There was a hand stealing warmth on his skin.

It was nice.

Before Luo Binghe could begin to untangle the two of them, he realized two things at once: his shizun had woken and his shishu had already been awake, watching them.

A sharp hiss of breath sucked in through Shen Qingqiu's teeth and jerked his hand away from Luo Binghe's chest. Flustered, he made an adorable sound. There must have been a lot of skin on display.

Since his shizun had woken before Luo Binghe could save his face, he decided to do the next best thing and pretend to be asleep.

“Morning,” Liu Qingge mumbled. His voice was deliciously groggy.

“Shh!” Shen Qingqiu whisper-hissed. “Don’t wake him!”

“Mn.” Liu Qingge had managed to drench that single sound with sarcasm and mirth. He seemed to already catch on that it was too late for that.

“My arm is stuck,” Shen Qingqiu sighed.

“Oh, no.” *Whatever shall we do?* was unsaid but explicit in his shishu’s tone.

“*Qingge.* Help.”

Luo Binghe pretended to “stir” in his sleep. He threw out his arm to catch his shishu and yanked him to his chest.

A surprised *“oof”* escaped the war god as his chest slammed into Luo Binghe. He grumbled in embarrassed irritation.

“Ah,” Shen Qingqiu breathed, surprised. “Who would have thought… such a cuddler.”

“Right.” Liu Qingge’s voice was now dry. He mercilessly dug his elbow into Luo Binghe’s side.

“*Qingge!”*

“What?”

“He’s sleeping!”

“*Right.”*

Knowing he only had so much leeway, Luo Binghe swallowed down his smile. He stirred again, and loosened his hold to stretch. It included arching his back, which allowed his shizun to free his numb arm. With a delicate haste, Shen Qingqiu quickly extracted himself. Their legs untangled. Luo Binghe missed the warmth. By the time he opened his eyes, his shishu sat on the edge of the bed and watched him, while his shizun had corrected his own robes and pretended to be very invested in his hair.

Luo Binghe yawned and sat up. His inner robes slid down to his forearms. He rubbed his face with his hands. “This disciple… can prepare breakfast.” He felt eyes on him, so he stretched with his arms above his head.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his shizun shield his face with his hand. Liu Qingge, on the other hand, did not look away.

Heat curled through Luo Binghe and he relaxed, pointedly looking right back at him.

Liu Qingge swallowed. There was a war brewing in his mind – one side that might make him want to run, and the other... His jaw tightened, and pretty blush danced across his cheeks. One side of the war won. He lifted a stubborn gaze to meet Luo Binghe's eyes. Even hardly sleep-mussed, he looked softer than usual. A single eyebrow crawled up his forehead. *You're showing off,* that look seemed to say.

You're the one enjoying the view. Luo Binghe smirked.

Instead of getting offended, Liu Qingge huffed a laugh. He reached over and forced Luo Binghe's robe to close. His shishu's nails scraped across Luo Binghe's chest and he shivered. "Shameless," his shishu muttered. There was almost a hint of chiding adoration in his tone.

"Let's, uh, get dressed first," Shen Qingqiu said with a cough. His head was turned away from both of them.

"Mn," Liu Qingge agreed.

The three of them got dressed, and Luo Binghe was gifted with the chance to help both with their hair. His heart was full. He could do this, couldn't he? Pretend to be fully human for the rest of his life?

Maybe down the line he could somehow convince his shishu that not all demons were bad. Maybe he could even get Shen Qingqiu to help.

Or… maybe there was another solution.

Luo Binghe had spent the entire night tracking down the complexities of the System's perverse intrusion. Delicate threads, thinner than that of a spider's web, connected between him and Shen Qingqiu, and him and Liu Qingge. It used both his shizun's and Luo Binghe's energies to function and repair itself, and used Liu Qingge as a supplement. Without Luo Binghe to stabilize the entity, it seemed to siphon energy with abandon. There's no doubt that it would eventually suck both Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu dry.

After an entire night of experimentation, he was now extremely aware of the entity's oily touch on their spiritual energies. He understood now what he had been doing by accident previously. As he spread out his awareness, he caught onto the feeble tendrils of energy. In the System's weakened state, it couldn't do much to fight Luo Binghe's manipulation of its power.

It wouldn't take much. Just a little tug, and it would send all three back into the other world.

There, Luo Binghe was human.

Xin Mo did not exist.

The System had no influence.

And Shen Yuan seemed to have enough money to leave none of them wanting.

There the three of them could live together forever, with a whole new world to explore. His shizun could show them so many new sights, and his shishu could learn to drive a car like he so desperately wanted to. Luo Binghe would spend the rest of his life making the two of them happy.

It was an extremely seductive thought.

The three of them meandered into the kitchen, and Luo Binghe started on breakfast. The first thing he did was heat water for some tea. He watched his shizun out of the corner of his eye with a satisfied smile. Due to Luo Binghe's insistence, Shen Qingqiu wore a more complex hairstyle and robes. He was a cutting figure, exuding cold power and unquestionable dignity. That made it a funny image to see him slumped over the counter, waiting for his tea to wake him up.

Liu Qingge ran through some light exercises and stretches in the largest part of the kitchen. He was mindful enough to stay out of Luo Binghe's way. His harsh expression was softened with quiet adoration when he watched his shixiong. That gentleness did not fade when his eyes drifted to Luo Binghe.

"This disciple did some research last night…" Luo Binghe said slowly, after he poured his shizun a cup of tea.

A sleepy sound of acknowledgement left Shen Qingqiiu. He sipped at his tea, too focused on the steaming liquid to really pay attention to anything else.

Luo Binghe smiled, and he returned to making breakfast. It might be best to give his shizun more time to wake up. It was a little unusual for him to be up this early in the morning. Perhaps after breakfast, he and Liu Qingge could run through some practice drills together and his shizun could rest on a nearby bench.

"Did you not sleep?" Liu Qingge asked. He wore a disapproving frown.

"This one rested," Luo Binghe promised. There wasn't much he could explain about the particulars of his "research." Not without exposing certain parts of himself.

Pausing in his stretches, Liu Qingge crossed his arms to scowl. "You need sleep."

Shen Qingqiu made a satisfied noise into his cup. "Heh. Now it's not directed at me."

"*Yuan,"* Liu Qingge growled. He crossed over to where his shixiong rested and held out a hand. "Wrist."

"Here?" Shen Qingqiu sighed. He offered a hand. "What did Binghe discover last night?" After only half a moment's consideration, he slumped against his shidi. It seemed that he was just tired enough to think of it as good revenge for having to stand there while his meridians were cleared.

Liu Qingge blushed. His focus did not waver, and he instead had to hide a small smile. His fingers almost reverently curled around the proffered wrist.

“This disciple focused on the energies of the System,” Luo Binghe explained, slowly. He was fighting not to get distracted by the two of them. “It…” He frowned. “It is splintered now. This Binghe can not exorcise it from Shizun without potentially causing damage.”

“*Exorcise?”* Shen Qingqiu startled.

“En,” Liu Qingge scowled.

“It is also in Shishu now,” Luo Binghe said with a sigh. “This one thinks when Liu-shishu was helping this one with his…” The word *tantrum* sat on his tongue.

“Qi deviation?” Liu Qingge supplied, dryly. His eyes told Luo Binghe that if he tried to call it anything else that there would be repercussions.

“This Binghe’s actions pulled Liu-shishu into all of this,” Luo Binghe said with a sigh.

Liu Qingge shrugged. “We will fix it.”

As easy as that. Luo Binghe lowered his eyes, and focused on kneading the dough for their breakfast. “This Binghe thinks it is necessary to help the System to fix itself before any exorcism.”

“Is exorcising it *necessary?”* Shen Qingqiu asked.

At the same time, both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge said, “Yes.” Neither of their tones gave room for argument.

A strangled sigh escaped Shen Qingqiu and he frowned into his cup. Instead of broaching that topic, he instead asked, “Did Binghe get any further insights on how we might fix the System?”

“Mn.” Luo Binghe began to partition the dough, trying to discourage the blush that wanted to coat his skin. He tried not thinking of last night’s kiss. He failed. “The System needs more energy to rebuild itself, and needs it in steady circulation with those that are affected.”

“So we meditate and circulate our qi,” Shen Qingqiu said, appeased.

“...” Luo Binghe pressed his lips into a tight line.

“Needs… more than that,” Liu Qingge guessed. His face had turned red.

All Shen Qingqiu had to do was glance over at him to understand. *Dual cultivation.* He made a strangled sound.

“We can attempt meditation and circling our qi first, Shizun,” Luo Binghe promised. It might help to get them to a point where he could work on exorcising the entity without worrying about damaging either his shizun or his shishu.

Sighing, Shen Qingqiu dropped his face in his hand. He muttered to himself, “Well. Two hawks, one arrow, and such.”

“What?” Liu Qingge asked.

Luo Binghe stopped working with the dough to stare at his shizun.

Shen Qingqiu paused and peered at the two of them. “What?”

“Shizun, what two hawks?” Luo Binghe asked. He had a sudden sinking realization and did not need his shizun to answer him. “Without A Cure?” All these years his shizun had lived with *it* and he hadn’t said a *thing?*

He had known a cure… this *entire time?*

Liu Qingge’s eyes widened as it dawned on him as well. He threw a withering glare at Shen Qingqiu, anger flushing his skin.

Before any more could be said, there was a desperate pounding at the door. Luo Binghe snarled his frustration, teeth grinding together. How *dare* anyone interrupt them? He was about to stalk to the door and tell them off.

“Ah, Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said, setting down his cup. He plucked his wrist away from Liu Qingge and moved around to the door. “It’s fine. It sounds important.”

“*Yuan!”* Liu Qingge snapped.

Waving both of them off, the Qing Jing Peak Lord fled from the room. An annoyed growl clicked in the back of Luo Binghe’s throat and he stalked after his shizun with the war god just as peeved at his heels.

Shen Qingqiu made it to the door and welcomed whoever stood at the other side. It was a horrifically plain face: Ming Fan. Even after all this time, there would always be a small part of Luo Binghe’s heart that shrunk in fear whenever he saw that face. He knew that if the head disciple ever dared to try anything to him again, Luo Binghe could overpower him easily. That didn’t do anything to soothe the small child in his heart that was tormented by that boy for years.

“Sh-Shizun,” Ming Fan said with a gasp, dropping into a bow. Sweat gathered on his brow and he was out of breath. His clothes were disheveled, as if he had sprinted a great distance.

“Ming Fan?” Shen Qingqiu said, hand twitching at his side as if he stopped himself from reaching out. “What is it?”

“The other sects,” Ming Fan blurted, and he threw a wide-eyed glance up at him. “They’re here.”

It was a stand-off disguised as a diplomatic entreaty. The Huan Hua Sect had shown up in full force, a sea of gold that rolled down the foot of the mountain. Banners hung high and danced in the wind. Tents dotted the hillsides in a not-so-quiet show of power and preparedness. A few other colors poked through the startling flood of gold – the other sects. Among them were the Zhao Hua Monastery and Tian Yi Overlook, the few that Luo Binghe recognized. Lips pulled into a disgruntled and thin line, he glowered at the show of force. His fingers curled into his palms, and he felt the slight prickle of claws there.

Nearby, the Cang Qiong Mountain leaders gathered. They spoke in hushed voices, each more exasperated than the last. Liu Qingge stood as a solid pillar next to Shen Qingqiu, arms crossed with a deep scowl on his face daring anyone to suggest they just hand the Qing Jing Peak Lord over.

Yue Qingyuan cleared his throat. It was sharp enough to immediately silence all the other peak lords. His expression was clean and diplomatic, though there was something dangerous in the dark glint of his eyes. “It does not matter that they are here earlier than intended. We’re prepared. We will invite them to a conversation, see what is to be said, and make our case.” He dipped his head towards Shen Qingqiu. “Qingqiu-shidi will join me. The rest of you fall in formation behind us.” After a moment’s hesitation, he inclined his head to both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe. “You two will follow close to Qingqiu-shidi.”

“Yes, Zhangmen-shixiong,” Liu Qingge murmured his assent. It was odd to see the war god’s face revert back to its stiff statue-esque indifference. Luo Binghe hadn’t realized how much the war god had softened around the two of them, and he also didn’t know when he had started being so closed off to the sect leader. When had that happened?

The five of them started down the stairs to the Huan Hua Palace and its witnesses. They stopped underneath a gate that marked the entryway to the Cang Qiong Mountain and waited.

Stepping out from the sea of bodies, the Old Palace Master ambled forward. There was a broad smile on his face as he eased up the steps. A few more bodies followed after him - the Little Palace Mistress, Gongyi Xiao, and a few others that Luo Binghe did not care to remember. He stayed behind his shizun, attempting to stop himself from glowering outright at the procession.

“Disciple Binghe,” the Old Palace Master said, hands pressing to his chest with relief. Tears wet the corners of the man’s eyes. “This humble one is so relieved to see that you are alive and well. Especially considering the circumstances in which you were… escorted away from our holdings within Jin Lan City.” He had a stern, thin-lipped expression that stated he believed that “escorted” was putting it mildly.

Luo Binghe did not answer and instead waited (respectfully for once) for Yue Qingyuan to greet their “guests.” His hands itched at his sides. It would be far easier for him to draw his sword and deal with all of this in a more physical manner. At his side, the Bai Zhan War God shifted from one foot to the other. It appeared he was having just as much luck with his patience. Then his shoulder bumped into Luo Binghe’s. Their eyes met. Liu Qingge searched his expression. He flashed him a reassuring look. It was gone in an instant, his face stern and cold, but it had its intended effect. A knot of Luo Binghe’s chest loosened.

There would be plenty of witnesses – just as the Old Palace Master had planned, no doubt. The other sects were called as impartial bystanders, though it was more likely that they were all victims in the Old Palace Master's machinations. The old man had always seemed a little oily to Luo Binghe, but overall harmless. It was hard to still hold that opinion, seeing all the faces ready to turn against his shizun. The Old Palace Master might have planned to isolate Shen Qingqiu and force the cultivation world to turn against him.

Except that Shen Qingqiu was not alone. They had successfully brought the Cang Qiong Sect to their side. By the stern looks of the peak lords, all of them were ready to stand united against anything that the Huan Hua Sect intended to throw at them. There was an equal show of force on both sides. If a battle did break out, it would be bloody and result in a lot of loss of life.

Not that Luo Binghe minded, but he knew it would distress his shizun.

After a long winded speech, the Old Palace Master folded his hands in front of him and said, "We would like you to release Disciple Binghe back to us."

"This one would be more than willing," Yue Qingyuan said, smoothly, "if that is what Disciple Luo wished." He turned to him and dipped his head, encouraging him to step forward and giving him permission to speak.

Luo Binghe made a show of stepping forward and falling in line right beside his shizun. He dipped into a respectful bow, both to the sect leader and his shizun, in a proper greeting. It was the epitome of respect! He couldn't help but wonder if his shishu was proud of the display. Then he turned to the Old Palace Master with a flat expression and said, "This Binghe has returned to his master and is more than pleased to stay."

Startled gasps rippled beyond the Old Palace Master, whose face crumpled with an obvious show of worry. He turned to gently wave down the Little Palace Mistress and took a moment to compose himself as he did. It was clear that he believed there to be some sort of bewitching going on. With a heavy breath, he turned back to face the Cang Qiong Sect and said, "Very well. But before Disciple Binghe makes this choice, can this old man speak with him for old time's sake?" he asked with a gentle smile.

Something in Luo Binghe gave way. He never cared too much for the Huan Hua Palace other than it being a step in his grand scheme – but the sect leader had eagerly reached out a hand to him. He had been generous and kind, if… disconcertingly possessive sometimes. Luo Binghe bowed slightly and said, "This Binghe will not step too far from his shizun, but he can hold a conference."

"Ah, well, no matter," the Old Palace Master smiled. He turned towards a few others behind him and murmured into their ears. Then he stepped off to the side to a neutral space. "Is this fine?"

Luo Binghe waited until he had nods from both Sect Leader Yue and his shizun before he moved to step into the space with the Old Palace Master.

“This will give us some mild privacy, if Disciple Binghe is alright with it?” the Old Palace master asked, holding up a talisman.

Luo Binghe studied the drawing on the surface, and he nodded. He recognized it. The talisman created a weak field that blocked sound from traveling. It was mostly used by young disciples who had slipped off into dark corners more than it was used for anything else. While it stopped sound from leaking out, it also stopped sound from leaking in. He dipped his head in acquiescence.

With a small spark of qi, a noise-dampening field fluttered around the two of them. The Old Palace Master searched Luo Binghe’s eyes, his weathered face full of warmth and concern. “My dear boy…” he said, voice roughened with age, “are you safe?”

“Yes,” Luo Binghe said, instantly. “...this Binghe is embarrassed to admit, but there was a grand misunderstanding between his shizun and him. We have cleared that up.” He paused, and decided to press, “There have been a lot of misunderstandings surrounding Shizun. This humble one would request the Old Palace Master to extend his gracious favor and put a stop to this.”

“...not all are misunderstandings, my boy,” the Old Palace Master said gravely. “There have been some investigations. Your master… he’s not who you think he is.”

Luo Binghe had to repress an involuntary laugh. *You don’t even know the start of it.* Except that – his shizun was both not who he had expected and *everything* he had ever wanted and more. Eyes softening, he spoke, “Respectfully, this Binghe understands his shizun more than anyone else.” Maybe other than, of course, Liu Qingge. There was no point in bringing that into the conversation. “This Binghe would ask for the Huan Hua Sect to drop all accusations, and leave this one in peace with his shizun.”

With worried eyes, the Old Palace Master reached out and took both of Luo Binghe’s hands in his own and he searched his eyes. “My dear boy, I do not think you understand. Listen to me. Your master… he massacred an entire family in cold blood.” He let that sentence sit. It was shocking to hear. *That* hadn’t been one of the things that Shang Qinghua and Shen Qingqiu discussed. “That family had taken him in, in the kindness of their hearts, and raised him. And he murdered them and burned down their entire estate.” The Old Palace Master seemed desperate for Luo Binghe to understand, squeezing his hands with a surprising amount of force. “He then became a student to a *demonic cultivator.* Wu Yanzi.” When that name didn’t spark any reaction, he explained, “He was a wicked, evil man. Cruel and heartless. He did awful things that this old man would not even *dare* repeat.” He searched his eyes. With a deep breath, he reached up and cupped the side of Luo Binghe’s face. “There is all of that against the Qing Jing Peak Lord. But the worst of all being how he treated you, my Binghe.”

That wasn’t him. Luo Binghe’s jaw tightened with resolve. The accusations raised against his shizun were worse than any of them had known. At least he knew them now. He began to plan ways to discredit them.

After a moment of silence, the Old Palace Master sighed. “You don’t believe me."

“This one thinks that more investigations must be done,” Luo Binghe murmured.

For a split second, the old man’s eyes turned a startling cold. Then his expression melted. “Luo Binghe will always choose his shizun, won’t he?” He smiled and patted Luo Binghe’s forearm. “It would not matter if the truth was right in front of you.”

With a stubborn nod, Luo Binghe turned to look over at both his shizun and his shishu. In every single world, in every single life, he would always choose them. Even if it meant crawling through hell and back. It would always be them.

“Ah… my loyal and bullheaded boy… just like your mother.”

Luo Binghe blinked, startled, and turned back towards the Huan Hua Sect Leader. “What…?”

“Or perhaps… a little too much like your father.”

Not once had the Old Palace Master ever had a single whiff of ill intention. Luo Binghe did not expect the man’s quick reflexes. There was a talisman placed upon his chest with a single burst of qi.

Luo Binghe reacted before he could think, shoving the old man backwards.

When the old man stumbled out of the influence of the talisman, he cried and crumpled to the ground. He threw out a hand, just as the talisman went off. Luo Binghe flew. Agony cracked through him, and he roared. He twisted in the air in a desperate attempt to catch himself as he fell. Something ripped through his meridians, tearing into both his spiritual and demonic veins.

It hurt.

He collapsed into a heap in the crowd, trembling. People rushed to his side, hands caught his arms. It felt as if they yanked on a broken bone. He felt suffocated and surrounded. He cried out and shoved them back.

Screams erupted around him. What was once a huge crowd of do-gooders became frightened bodies scrambling away from him. He stared down at his hands and realized in a detached way that his claws were out. With a shaky hand, he reached up to press a hand to the mark on his forehead. Even if he could not feel it, he saw it in the faces of those that surrounded him.

“...demon!” the Old Palace Master cried. “I tried to negotiate with him, to save your sect, but he attacked me!”

His zuiyin. His demonic features. His demonic qi. Everything. It was no longer hidden. The talisman, whatever it was, had exposed him. Luo Binghe snarled. He tore the paper from his chest. With a flare of qi, he burned it. He forced himself to his feet, even as all the muscles in his body screeched in protest. He stumbled.

Cultivators grabbed for their swords, backing away from him. They were scared. *Of him.* As if he were a rabid and raving animal, not the disciple who had bowed serenely to his shizun a

few moments ago.

A yawning chasm started to break open inside his chest. *No,* Luo Binghe thought. It was out. They knew. They *all* knew. His breath shuttered. Eyes wide with terror, he looked to where his shizun and shishu stood.

The War God of Bai Zhan tore his glare away from the Old Palace Master. His eyes found Luo Binghe, standing among what once were allies. There was no longer a trace of any softness in his face. His expression was closed off and fierce; that of a stranger's.

Luo Binghe couldn't breathe. *Please,* he wanted to beg, *please. It's still me. It's always been me.* He couldn't fight the tears that burned the back of his eyes. His hands shook. He held out some hope, pleading and begging to any god that might hear him, that his shishu would see him. That his shishu would *listen.* That-

The war god moved, Cheng Luan singing as he unsheathed it. He was a whirlwind of pure fury, launching straight towards Luo Binghe.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Roughly 3,600 words with an estimated 18 minute reading time.

As another warning, this chapter also ends in a cliff hanger... and it also will probably be extremely frustrating.

No real content warnings other than: LQG is very angry, SQQ thinks he has the best ideas, manipulation, and a cliff hanger.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clang! Liu Qingge's mind narrowed in on the battle at hand. Metal creaked. He had caught the other sword mid-swing, and his shoulders ached from the force of it. It felt *good.* He tweaked his wrist, and sent the other sword flying. *Weak grip,* he thought as he stepped forward and kicked his opponent flat in the chest. *Weak stance.* He didn't kick hard – hard enough to prove a point but not to break any bones. Even though he wanted to send that man flying for what he had done.

Fucking finally.

Something Liu Qingge could *do.* Adrenaline roared in his veins. Ever since that stupid old man opened his mouth, he had wanted to punch something. (Ignoring the fact that his shixiong had said something earlier that day that *really* made him want to punch something.) The moment the Huan Hua sect leader had taken away Luo Binghe, he knew something wasn't right. His fingers had twitched. He had the same feeling when something was stalking him from out of sight. Frustratingly, he couldn't figure out what he was missing. He had never learned how to read lips, and he had doubted that ability would be much help with the two of them turned towards another. He had kept a sharp eye on them, reading their body language. Not once had Luo Binghe seemed on guard, even after the Old Palace Master had shown some frustration.

Never underestimate a foe.

He would have to remind Luo Binghe of that, later.

Then everything went wrong. Luo Binghe had thrown out a clawed hand – a *clawed* hand – at the Old Palace Master, face twisted with shock. Something was glowing on his forehead. It was-

An explosion. It had launched Luo Binghe into what should have been a safety net of the Cang Qiong Sect. Shen Qingqiu had stifled a shocked cry and had lurched towards his disciple. With a strangled sound, Yue Qingyuan had caught his sleeve and held him back.

The world held still.

Everything was frozen; except the Old Palace Master who howled and raved, using the stillness to weave discord, "...a *heavenly* demon! I tried to negotiate with him, to save your sect, but he attacked me!"

Liu Qingge had seen the moment people started to turn against the demon. Hands went to swords; others began to gather spiritual power. Then he drew Cheng Luan. Without a moment's hesitation, he had launched himself into the burgeoning chaos.

"Qingge, *no!"* Shen Qingqiu cried out, horrified.

The demon had stood there, weakened, with his hands shaking at his sides. Despite all the people around him, he only had eyes for Liu Qingge. Red eyes. It was a beautiful shade that matched the zuiyin on his forehead.

(He never thought that he would ever consider a demon *beautiful.)*

Tears had spilled down the demon's cheeks. His eyes had fallen shut, and he had bowed his head in defeat. It was like a dog rolling onto its back, ready to accept punishment.

What? Liu Qingge had landed and twisted on his feet.

Clang! With a flick of his wrist, his sword had caught the blade of a stupidly bold disciple who thought to try and swing at a man who had his back turned to him. It was a cowardly move.

Now that same disciple was flying. Maybe Liu Qingge had kicked a *little* too hard – he couldn't find it in himself to regret it. That man had made a choice, a foolish and spineless one at that. Frustration boiled in his chest. He grabbed Luo Binghe and stepped in front of him, using his own body to shield him from any more opportune dastards. His expression grew dark. He shouted, "Luo Binghe is a disciple of the Cang Qiong Sect! Do *not* raise your blade against him!" With a dismissive noise, he lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes. "Or go through me."

All those who had grabbed their swords faltered. Even his own disciples, those of Bai Zhan Peak, openly gaped at him.

It probably *was* surprising. Liu Qingge never attempted to hide his distaste for things that hunted the weak. Nor did he hide his distaste for demons. Those two categories often aligned, which only fed into a feedback loop of distrust and dislike. Not to mention it was demons who hurt his Yuan. Demons who hurt his Binghe.

Wait.

That was it, wasn't it? That's why Luo Binghe acted the way he had – he had thought Liu Qingge wanted to hurt him. The thought made his body turn cold. Nausea swam in his gut. Luo Binghe would have just… rolled over? As if he deserved it?

"S-Shishu…?" Luo Binghe choked wetly behind him.

Liu Qingge did not like taking his eyes off potential enemies (never underestimate your foe) but he knew that tone of voice. That was the tone of voice when that little brat had fallen off the ledge, and all he needed was a slight boost of encouragement so he could drag himself back onto solid ground. With his free hand, Liu Qingge reached back and sought Luo Binghe's hand. His fingers curled around clawed fingers, a few sharp points pricking his skin. He didn't care. He held on, squeezing. Gently, he spoke, "What did I say?"

A startled, wet gasp sounded behind him.

"Binghe is a disciple of Cang Qiong Sect," he said, more softly than he did before in a tone meant just for his demon. "We're here to take care of you."

He meant that the first time he said it. Luo Binghe had shattered all of his preconceived notions of demons and everything he thought he understood. He had thought that a demon had pulled him into a curse and was ready to do everything he could to save Shen Qingqiu and himself.

Only to find a broken man at the end of that road, sobbing into the arms of his shizun and begging to be loved.

Are you alright? Liu Qingge had asked in Shen Yuan's sitting room, after discoveries that shattered his entire understanding of the world and its workings.

Demons were supposed to be malicious and cruel. Demons weren't supposed to admit weakness.

No, Luo Binge had admitted, *I'm not alright.*

That might have been the turning point – or maybe it was long before that. Maybe it was when Luo Binghe had egged Liu Qingge on to punish himself, losing control and letting his demonic qi and zuiyin escape. Maybe it was a culmination of everything. Liu Qingge didn't know. He didn't care.

Luo Binghe was *his.* Everyone else was just going to have to fucking deal with it.

Shaking arms wrapped around his waist and clutched onto his robes. A face buried between his shoulder blades. There was a disbelieving hiccup of breath. The embrace was embarrassing. Liu Qingge shoved down that discomfort, and patted Luo Binghe's hands consolingly. *Touch.* It was all about *touch* for Luo Binghe. Touch reset him and let him come back from whatever hell his inner demons had thrown him into.

Others openly gaped at Liu Qingge as if he had just thrown Cheng Luan aside and announced that from here on out, he was going to join the theater.

“Liu-shidi?” Yue Qingyuan asked, startled.

Eyes narrowed, Liu Qingge ignored his sect leader and motioned for Shen Qingqiu to come towards them. He needed to have both of his-

His-

He needed to have both of them near him in case this all went awry. If he had to fight his sect, he would.

(Loyalty, where was his loyalty?)

(It had gone down the drain the moment Shen Qingqiu placed a hand on his back in Ling Xi Caves. It was gone long before Luo Binghe looked him in the eye and *saw* him. It hadn’t even had a chance the moment demons became an enemy to everyone else and Luo Binghe became *his.)*

There was so much noise now. The sect leader to the Zhao Hua Monastery was raving for an immediate call to arms. Not doing much to help, the Old Palace Master turned to his sect and all the others to begin a dramatic speech of his discoveries. He strung a story where the evil Shen Qingqiu had purposely planted this heavenly demon for his own power. The Old Palace Master, on the other hand, had only been attempting to save them all by bringing the beast back to the Huan Hua Palace. Only then would they safely be able to contain it and get rid of it.

(It. *It.* As if his Binghe was a *thing!)*

Those among the Cang Qiong Sect were murmuring, startled and confused. Most waited on the sect leader to act. Bai Zhan disciples were unnerved and did not know what to do. In almost every other case, they would have followed their shizun without question. Except this went against everything they thought they understood.

Yue Qingyuan was off kilter. It took him too long to react, to figure out the best path forward.

Fuck if Liu Qingge wasn’t mad at him. He was *livid*. His frustration must have bled into his dreams. In one of them, the Sect Leader had confessed to being a demon. It was all he needed to affirm that it was an imposter, and he started attacking it. That fight was almost cathartic. If they got out of this, Liu Qingge was going to challenge Yue Qingyuan. He needed to process his rage and a spar would be the perfect way to get it out of his system.

They just needed to get out of this first.

With every passing second that seemed more and more unlikely. The other sects were beginning to arm themselves, preparing for an all out attack on one single man who was fighting back tears.

Cowards.

Yue Qingyuan was moving too slowly. The man was smart and usually able to turn almost any situation in his favor. He had carved his way to his position with a sharpened tongue and even quicker wit. He hid a ruthless side behind a polite smile, which often tricked so many others. It hadn't tricked Liu Qingge. He knew that man. Not once had he ever acted dishonorably.

(Other than when Shen Qingqiu had slapped him. Fuck. He had to stop thinking about that. It would make him too angry. He's not thinking about that panic attack, either.)

Their sect leader *should* be able to get out of anything. But how in the hell would he get them out of *this?* Yue Qingyuan had no footing to work with. Surprise attacks were flying in at all sides.

Using the sect leader's indecision as a distraction, Shen Qingqiu broke away from him. He drew his shoulders back and became every bit the Qing Jing peak lord. He was breathtaking today, decked out in full ornamentation. His robes flowed around him, soft greens moving in a hypnotic sway. A fan hid the bottom half of his face, and his eyes were sharp and narrowed in scorn. He twisted to survey the scene, eyes calculating and quick.

No doubt he was coming to the same conclusion: they were fucked.

"Liu-shishu," Luo Binghe murmured behind him. "Make me an enemy. Let me take the fall. We can turn attention away from Shizun and pin it on me. This Binghe has a plan."

That… sounded like a stupid plan.

"No," Liu Qingge said. "Let go. I need to move."

Clawed hands dug into his silks. He wasn't as put-off by them as he thought he might be. In fact… there was a fascinating allure to those hands. He couldn't let his attention drag too far away from the group of cultivators in front of him.

"Liu-shishu, *please-"*

A haughty laugh startled everyone. Shen Qingqiu slipped out a talisman to project his voice. (When the hell had he prepared that!?) He laughed in complete and utter disdain. "This master supposes the gig is up."

Liu Qingge's stomach dropped. No. *No!* "Qingqiu!" He roared. He should have fucking guessed if *one* of his idiots had come up with a stupid plan, the other had as well.

"Yes, my minion?" Shen Qingqiu drawled, lazily waving the fan in front of his face. "Come here, then." He snapped his fan shut and used it to point to the ground next to him.

It was unfair because he had predicted *both* Luo Binghe's and his reaction, and they both jerked towards him before he finished speaking. They were desperate to stop him before he threw himself down on this executioner's block.

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe cried.

“It was difficult getting a heavenly demon underneath my thrall,” Shen Qingqiu continued. “And the War God of Bai Zhan Peak was not any easier.” As they reached him, he lifted an uncaring hand and tucked a piece of hair behind Luo Binghe’s ear. With two sentences, he had destroyed any chance of them being able to refute *any* of his words. If either tried to deny it or act out, it would just look like the two of them behaving “under his thrall.”

“Qingqiu,” Liu Qingge snarled. Fuck. *Fuck.* He was angry. Would everyone stop pissing him off!?

“Hush and be a good war god,” Shen Qingqiu said, tapping his fan underneath Liu Qingge’s chin.

It was so infuriating, Liu Qingge was certain that his vision blacked out. How had he forgotten how *good* Shen Yuan was at being Shen Qingqiu?

“Shizun, please,” Luo Binghe whispered, desperately, “let this Binghe fix this. Don’t do this.”

Ignoring him, Shen Qingqiu turned to the crowd. He spoke quickly, to stop either of them from acting. “Luo Binghe was just a child. All he had ever wanted was to become a cultivator – even after he discovered he was half-demon. It was so disappointing. This master had thought demons were meant to be evil and cruel. Except all Luo Binghe ever wanted,” his face twisted in disgust as he said, “ was to do *good.* When I first attempted to get him to turn against the sects, that’s when my thrall on him broke. And he turned his back to me-”

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe roared, and he caught onto his silks. “He’s lying, he’s-”

“*Stop!”* Yue Qingyuan snapped. His hand went to his sword. “All three of you. This is a Cang Qiong Sect matter.”

Maybe Liu Qingge could forgive the sect leader, one day.

With a disbelieving sneer, the Zhao Hua Monastery sect leader shouted, “All the sects are in danger as long as that *thing* runs free!”

The Old Palace Master tried throwing out his hands in a placating matter, “Let’s all calm down and-”

“If *any* of you try to follow me,” Shen Qingqiu cried, “I will set both the war god and this heavenly demon on all of you!” Then with the worst fake-evil laugh anyone had ever laughed, he threw down his sword and stepped onto it. With a flourish he took to the sky and called out, “Follow me, minions! Now!”

Neither of them had any choice.

Beyond furious, Liu Qingge soared after him. He was severely considering many acts of violence. He couldn’t breathe through the tightness in his chest. The three of them soared over the dense forest. Liu Qingge hadn’t realized he’d been shouting until his throat started to ache. Only when the three of them were far enough away, did he scream, “*Yuan!”*

“It’s fine!” Shen Qingqiu looked over his shoulder at the two of them, the corner of his lip pulled up. “I have-” His eyes widened comically, and his sword immediately dropped. Without A Cure.

Liu Qingge moved first, but Luo Binghe was quicker. Between the two of them, they were able to catch both Shen Qingqiu and his sword before he plummeted to the ground below. With a wordless exchange, they landed.

Sighing, Shen Qingqiu brushed out his robes. His lips pulled into a thin line. “We should probably go further on foot. We only have to keep evading them until-“

Anger surged through Liu Qingge. Even as a child he spoke better with his hands. But he had long since learned not to hurt others because of his emotions — not to raise a fist just to feel the crack of his knuckles against skin. It was a close thing. He grabbed Shen Qingqiu by the collar and dragged him to a tree, barely withholding himself from slamming his shixiong against it. Instead he pinned him there, breathing hard. “Yuan.”

(It *was* Shen Yuan now. There was no mask here.)

There was no fear on Shen Yuan’s face, only wide-eyed shock. The tips of his ears tinged a little pink. “Qingge?”

“What. Was. That?” Liu Qingge said through his teeth.

“Shizun.” Luo Binghe stalked around behind them, spiritual energy flaring wildly. It was strange to feel the demonic qi so close. His instincts still twitched at the dark aura.

“It’s fine!” Shen Yuan raised his hands in surrender. “I’ll take the fall. We will evade the sects for a while, just long enough for-“

“For what?” Luo Binghe growled. “Them to completely destroy your reputation!? Them to hunt you down like a beast!? Shizun!”

“We will just have to be cautious,” Shen Yuan said, slowly. “Then-“

“Your peak,” Liu Qingge protested.

“Your disciples!” Luo Binghe roared.

“They’ll be *fine!”* Shen Yuan raised his voice. “It’s fine! Would you two just listen to me?! I-“

“*A-Yuan!”* Luo Binghe screamed.

Hearing that name from Luo Binghe made Shen Yuan freeze. He gaped at him.

Breathing heavily, Luo Binghe stepped up beside Liu Qingge. “Did you think we would be okay watching them take away everything from you? Did you think we would be *fine* with you leaving everything you love behind?!”

The softness evaporated from Shen Yuan at once. He snapped, shoving Liu Qingge back. “What did you want me to do, Binghe?! That old *shit* of a sect leader was going to drag you through the mud! Throw you to the wolves!! Do you know what they did to the *last* heavenly demon?!” He grabbed onto Luo Binghe and shook him. “I promised you! I am *not* throwing you away again!!”

Those words settled around them. Then Luo Binghe broke. He grabbed onto his shizun’s hand and sank to the ground. Tears spilled from his eyes. “This is my fault.”

“*Binghe,”* Shen Yuan groaned. Frustration tightened his jaw, and he rolled his eyes to the sky as if asking for patience.

“If this Binghe had just returned home, if he hadn’t involved the Huan Hua-“

“Binghe…” With a long sigh, Shen Yuan breathed out all of his anger. It was fascinating to watch it slip away, piece by piece. Tender hands reached out and held either side of the demon’s face. His thumb gently traced along his cheek. “Binghe. Please trust this master. I have a plan.”

Liu Qingge couldn’t do that. He couldn’t let go of his anger. It was stabbing him with every breath. He wanted to rip it out of him, to release the pressure. “Yuan.” He caught onto his shixiong’s arm. “You’re leaving it all behind.”

There was that flicker of anger in Shen Yuan’s eyes again. Oh, how Liu Qingge *ached* for him to let it out. To scream and shove him. To hit him. He *wanted it.*

Instead, his shixiong calmly asked, “What other choice was there?”

There were so many other choices. So many that Liu Qingge did not know how to voice. It was aggravating. Too angry to breathe, he shook his head and dropped his shixiong’s arm. He forced himself to step away. He walked over to a tree and with an angry yell, he slammed his fist into it. He hadn’t put any ounce of spiritual power into that hit. The skin on his knuckles split. His entire body trembled. He needed to fight something.

The punch wasn’t good enough.

Liu Qingge gave in. He drew Cheng Luan. He was a child with a sword, with more lethal coordination. He poured spiritual power into each swing, and became a whirlwind of metal and fury.

He knew better than to needlessly raze a forest.

He couldn’t say much for the ground or boulders he came across.

Barely out of breath, he stared at the destruction he wrought.

It barely skimmed the surface of his vexation.

But he could only be a child for so long. Jaw tight, he turned back to the other two. Neither had said a thing during his tantrum. Still frustrated, he ground out, “We need to move.”

“The other world,” Luo Binghe murmured.

“What?” Shen Yuan asked.

“There’s no demons there,” Luo Binghe said. His eyes were flat, staring beyond them. “No sects.”

“There’s also no cultivation,” Shen Yuan spoke cautiously. Confused, he dared a glance at Liu Qingge. Then he remembered their spat. His eyes fell an instant later, guilt dampening his expression.

Liu Qingge set his jaw. He was too angry to tell Shen Yuan it was alright. Because it wasn’t alright. Nothing was *alright.*

“This Binghe is human there.”

There was a sound. Liu Qingge twitched and turned to survey the forest. His eyes narrowed. Something shifted through the trees. He tightened his hand around the hilt of Cheng Luan. “Let’s go.”

“Yes,” Luo Binghe murmured. “Let’s go.”

There was pain – that awful sensation of his soul ripping free, like tearing out the roots of a plant. Liu Qingge shouted, enraged and confused. That was a *person* coming towards them. They had stalled for far too long. Someone caught up.

He could not see their face or clothing. Nothing to give him any clue as to *who* they were. His vision was darkening. He tightened his hold on Cheng Luan, snarling as he tried to keep himself *here* by pure force of will.

Then he blacked out.

Chapter End Notes

LBH: just sacrifice me, it's okay

LQG: ...???? No???? it's NOT???

SQQ: don't worry, LBH, hold my beer

--

SY, getting pinned to the tree: uh oh. this is hot.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

4,700 words about, which is roughly a 21 minute reading time.

Ahhh omg <3 I noticed we broke 1k kudos... I am floored. Thank you guys! Thanks for all the comments as well... we've almost hit 1k on that too. I am absolutely astounded. Thank you so much for your support!

It gets a little heavy this chapter and the next. Please take care of yourselves!! I also promise - one of the tags for this fic IS "Happy Ending" and I promise you, we get that happy ending.

We just need some... sprinkles of character growth first! That's all this is... hahaha....

Another slight cliff hanger. Not as dramatic as the other two.

Content Warning: see end of chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sterile air mixed with chemicals greeted him. Liu Qingge stumbled in surprise and collapsed against a wall. Cold tile cooled his sweaty skin. He groaned, squeezing his eyes shut against a piercing headache. The lack of cultivation was his first clue. Blood on his upper lip was his next. The other world. With a growl, Liu Qingge slammed his fist against the wall. Damn it! Someone was coming for them, and all three of them were defenseless. What would they do, if whoever found them separated any of them?! Liu Qingge would be useless.

Pain wasn't unfamiliar to him. He was the War God of Bai Zhan. He knew pain and knew his body. And he was stubborn. He could push himself past the brink, and pull himself back when it was too far.

But *that* pain?

The agony of feeling every single thread in his body slowly unravel?

It was awful. And he had only been standing outside of that fucking room for the length of a conversation. Not even enough time for an incense stick to burn. It had taken him out for half the day.

What would happen if they were separated further than that? Away from the mountain? In a different city? Across the world?

“Liu-shishu?”

“We have to get back,” Liu Qingge whirled, hands clenched at his sides. “We-“

Luo Binghe stepped up close to him and caught his chin in his hand. With his sleeve, he tenderly wiped the blood away. Every single buzzing thought silenced. Liu Qingge stared at the man before him, mouth ready to shoot but the quiver was empty.

“Does it hurt?” Luo Binghe asked. Worry twinkled in his eyes like stars. His hand slid to catch the back of Liu Qingge’s neck while another clamped down around his forehead. “You’re warm.”

What.

The last time the two of them stood in this bathroom, Luo Binghe retreated away from him with rejection curling his shoulders. Liu Qingge hadn’t understood at the time – it was too difficult to even *conceive* of the idea that his shixiong’s sticky disciple even *saw* anyone else. To potentially be someone that inspired his affection? Baffling. Impossible.

Now he was…

…whatever this…

What!?

Voices trickled to the two of them – a pair of youths outside the door exclaiming about some sort of excitement. They were talking about a man collapsing. And blood. Liu Qingge didn’t even have to look at Luo Binghe. Both of them moved in synchronicity, flying from the bathroom. Their footsteps echoed in tandem as they rushed out back to where they had left Shen Yuan.

A crowd ballooned around the sitting area. They couldn’t see him. Multiple people had their blocks – er, phones – out. Some were wildly tapping away at the screens while others seemed to be talking to someone. How much time had passed in this world!?

“Move!” Liu Qingge ordered, raising his voice. People startled like a herd of wild horses, jerking away. He stormed forward.

Shen Yuan was on the ground. Someone crouched beside him, helping to prop him up. Blood drenched the front of his sweater and ran down his nose. They asked him questions, speaking in a calm and stern tone. His eyes were dazed, slipping around the legs of strangers until he caught sight of both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe. Relief unspooled the knot between his eyebrows, and he reached out.

Not thinking, Liu Qingge caught his hand and dropped down on his other side. He ignored the stranger, who appeared to be holding some devices to Shen Yuan’s chest. They had the

same practiced calm that he had seen on some of the Qian Cao disciples. He elected to ignore them.

“They’re going to take me to the hospital,” Shen Yuan rasped. His hands shook, and he slid out his phone and pressed it into Liu Qingge’s hand. “I’ll get out as soon as I can. Just… go back to the apartment. Order anything you need. Wait there for me.” He licked his lips. “It might take a few days.”

A few *days!?*

There was a frenzy of activity. The crowd parted as some sort of mobile bed was shoved towards them. People in uniform extracted him from Liu Qingge. Luo Binghe protested, attempting to grab onto his shizun.

Someone made the mistake of telling him to calm down.

Liu Qingge grabbed Luo Binghe’s arm and yanked him back into his chest. His arms snapped around the other man, holding him. Touch, again. So much *touch.* It was embarrassing to have to do it in front of so many others, but at least the man didn’t attempt beheading whoever had the audacity to suggest that Luo Binghe, sticky disciple number one, needed to *calm down.*

If people could stop saying stupid shit, that’d be great.

“Sh-” Luo Binghe swallowed down what he was about to say, and corrected, “Yuan-gege! We’ll go with you!”

“No!” Shen Yuan said, and he glared. “Go *home,* Binghe!”

Before anyone could protest any further, Shen Yuan was swept away from them. They followed after, like two lost lambs. They watched from a distance as Shen Yuan was loaded into a car with lights dancing all over it. Then two of them were left on the edge of the road, staring after that large car as it pulled away. They stayed there long after the dancing lights had disappeared around a corner.

Someone called to their attention, and thankfully Luo Binghe turned and answered them. Liu Qingge did not have a brain for socializing with strangers. He sighed and rubbed his temples.

Luo Binghe returned to his side and said, “They brought all the bags.”

There were too many knots in Liu Qingge’s throat for him to answer. He was angry. Angry enough to lash out and act like a child with no self control. A lot of that anger was centered on Shen Yuan. More of it on the Old Palace Master. A large chunk on the System.

Silence stretched between them. Long enough that Liu Qingge’s legs started to ache from standing still.

“How do we get home?” Luo Binghe asked.

"*Fuck."* Liu Qingge snarled. He pulled out the phone and glared down at it. After tapping in the password, he glared down at the many choices of shapes. Wordlessly, he gave up and handed it over to Luo Binghe.

"…you're mad," the half-demon pointed out.

It was supposed to be an opening for a conversation. Anyone with a modicum of conversational etiquette would have been able to answer. Not Liu Qingge. He barely withheld himself from throwing a withering glare at the man beside him. Of *course* he was mad. He was *beyond* mad. He didn't trust himself to answer, so he didn't. The two of them were stuck outside until they figured out how to navigate back to Shen Yuan's apartment. He didn't think that he could find his way back on his own. His innate sense of direction had helped him out since he was young, and he had never once gotten lost.

But this world, this city with all of its lights and sounds, was an entirely different beast.

A car pulled up along the curb. It rolled to a stop. Liu Qingge ignored it.

"This Binghe thinks he can find nearby hospitals," Luo Binghe murmured, poking away at the phone. "We can visit them and see which one Yuan-gege was taken to."

"Okay, cool. I thought it was you."

It took far too long for Liu Qingge to realize it was a voice directed at them. He looked up and saw a young woman.

The young woman, actually. Shen Yuan's sister.

She hesitated, "It is you two, right? The boyfriends?"

Liu Qingge stared at her. She was Shen Yuan when he was guarded. Her expression was cool with just a touch of friendliness to not scare others away. Grace lined every inch of her, even as she leaned out of the car window. Dark hair spilled over her shoulder, spilling down like ink.

His throat tightened. He came to a horrifying conclusion: he wasn't just angry. He was *terrified.* In the other world, Shen Yuan pitted the entire cultivation world against him. Here, he was dragged away in a foreign vehicle and Liu Qingge had no way of getting to him to make sure he was safe.

Seeing his sister, seeing an echo of Shen Yuan in another person, made Liu Qingge realize how much he missed him. How much he *needed* him.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Liu Qingge was in love.

He was desperately, stupidly, and completely in love – with a fucking idiot.

“Yes!” Luo Binghe startled into action. “You’re Shen Yuan’s sister!”

A polite laugh spilled from her. “Yes, hello!”

“Hello!” Luo Binghe lit up, all smiles and charm.

Both of them turned to Liu Qingge, waiting.

He had a hard time remembering words after his own internal revelation. “Hi.”

Shen Yuan’s sister laughed, delighted. “I’m Shen Huiying. Let me guess, my brother had another episode?” She said it so casually, as if it were nothing. Except for the fact that Liu Qingge had been reading Shen Yuan for *years* now. He recognized the tension in her expression, and the way her smile tightened.

“Yes,” he answered. “They took him.”

“To the hospital, right?” Shen Huiying asked. “And… let me guess, he ditched you guys with his phone so you could get back into his apartment and told you to just wait for him to get released?”

Liu Qingge snorted. “Yes.”

“I see,” Shen Huiying nodded. After a second, she motioned them forward. “Well then, come on in.” The door to the car opened, and she slid elegantly across the seats to give room for the two of them.

Without any hesitation, Luo Binghe sprung forward.

“Hold it!” Shen Huiying said, voice cool and stern. “Put those inside the trunk. What did you do, buy out an entire store?”

A little dazed, Liu Qingge helped Luo Binghe put the bags in the back. He wasn’t quite sure what was happening, not even after he was sitting in the car and it was in motion. The driver in the front eyed the two of them in cold curiosity but otherwise said nothing as he pulled back into the stream of cars.

Shen Huiying turned to the two of them, watching them both with a calm and cool expression. She was a copy of her brother in terms of attitude and poise. It… reminded him a lot of Mingyan. Liu Qingge had never been great with feelings or emotions – it had been the greatest point of contention between his sister and him growing up. She had always thought he rejected her, and didn’t want anything to do with her. (At the time, that had been far from the truth. He was young and stupid and trying to do his best to protect her.) In order to try and understand him, Mingyan started to mimic him.

Now she knew him better than he understood himself.

Feeling oddly protective, Liu Qingge frowned at Shen Huiying and said, “Don’t invite random people into your car.”

The smile she flashed at him was sharp and dangerous. “You’re not random. You’re my brother’s boyfriends.” Her eyes slid from one to the other, calculating. Even if she was young, she had the air of someone who was used to being in control. Whether or not that was an act, Liu Qingge couldn’t be certain. “What are your names?”

“Luo Binghe,” the cheery man introduced himself with a bright and charming smile. “And Liu Mingbo.”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge nodded, his stomach twisted with a quiet thrill upon hearing Luo Binghe use his birth name. There was nothing *wrong* with them using his courtesy name here — he did not think it stood out as being odd. But there was a quiet thrill about ignoring some propriety.

Different rules.

There was something in Shen Huiying’s expression when she heard Luo Binghe’s name. Her eyes sharpened. In an instant, that look was gone. “Well, I am pleased to meet you.”

“We’re very happy to meet you too,” Luo Binghe said, very easily pulling on his charismatic mask. “How did Shen-nushi find us?”

Shen Huiying’s guard broke just enough to show a flash of unease. “You can’t tell my brother.”

“Won’t promise that,” Liu Qingge said, honestly.

Surprised, she laughed. This one sounded less controlled than all the others, and she covered her mouth with a hand. “Well. At least I know you’re loyal.”

“Mn.”

Shen Huiying considered him again. Her lips curled into an approving smile. “Well. He’ll probably figure it out anyway.” She launched into an explanation that immediately lost Liu Qingge. There were too many new words that he did not know – something about a watch, something about an alert, something else about shared location…? He was, once again, glad that Luo Binghe had stepped up to lead the conversation. Without any hesitation, the man nodded along as if he understood. He even commended Shen Huiying on her ingenuity!

Whatever.

Liu Qingge watched the buildings fly by.

Love.

He was in *love.*

“Are you two really his boyfriends?” Shen Huiying asked, sounding young.

“Well…” Luo Binghe considered.

“We care about him,” Liu Qingge told the window. He didn’t dare look over his shoulder to see either of their expressions, feeling his skin heat. “A lot.”

“...I see,” Shen Huiying said, thoughtfully.

The rest of their ride was Luo Binghe and the sister playing some sort of conversational chess as they both tried to pry some information out of the other. Where Shen Huiying attempted to figure out how all three of them met, Luo Binghe was trying to dig up some information on his shizun.

Liu Qingge did not really have the energy to follow along, but he was glad the two of them were having fun.

Hospitals, Liu Qingge learned, sucked. It was a lot of waiting. A lot of sitting. A lot of complete and utter bullshit. Eventually the three of them were taken to a special sitting room, and he wasn’t quite sure if it was because someone had heard the name *Shen* or if it was because he looked about ready to pop someone’s head off.

He paced back and forth.

Shen Huiying sat with a straight back in a plush chair, her legs crossed at the ankles. She read something on her phone, her face an indifferent mask, and seemed content at giving the two of them space.

“Ming-gege?” Luo Binghe asked.

Liu Qingge drew to a stop and cast him a glance.

“The phone locked again,” he said, and he offered it up to him.

With a small grunt, Liu Qingge quickly typed in the password and handed it back. Then he went back to pacing.

“Ming-gege?”

“Mn?” Liu Qingge halted once again, standing near Luo Binghe. The phone was turned around to face him. He frowned at the screen, not quite recognizing what he was looking at. Then he saw the title. *Proud Immortal Demon Way.* PIDW. He was suddenly sitting beside Luo Binghe, heart pounding. The two of them started to read.

After a while, reading on something so small made his eyes hurt. The start of the book was not awful. He had been drawn into the setting (his own world) before he knew it. The experience was odd. Most of the novel so far, as he guessed, centered around Luo Binghe. He was a boy raised by a washerwoman. His life was not easy. There were some things that

made his stomach sink, and he felt as if he were peering into something he shouldn't be. He glanced over at the man beside him and drew back.

Luo Binghe let out a breath he had been holding, and he glanced up with a distant expression. It took a few moments for him to finally *look* at Liu Qingge. They stared at another. He was handsome. Dark, thick lashes lined his eyes. His hair was thick and unruly. It tumbled around his shoulders, almost reminding Liu Qingge of a wiggly brush stroke. He had nice lips, too. Full lips.

It was too bad those lips were pulled into a sad frown.

What if-

Before that thought could fully form, Liu Qingge blurted, "It's… personal."

To his relief, he didn't have to say more. Luo Binghe understood. It was *Luo Binghe's* life, his story. It told things about his past that may or may not be true – but from the way he was reacting, it was more likely that it did hit a little close to home. The disciple nodded, "Mn." After a few moments he hesitantly added, "It's okay, if it's Ming-gege."

Ah…

Liu Qingge could not smother his blush, not with Luo Binghe looking up at him that way. Not with him saying his name like that. He grunted. Before either of them could continue reading, there was a knock at the door. He flew to his feet, and was somewhat surprised to see Shen Huiying standing as well. He had thought she was lost on her phone.

Clearing her throat, she threw her shoulders back and played calm as she said, "Come in."

The person on the other side stepped in. It was an older woman, wearing soft pastels decorated with strange images. She caught sight of Shen Huiying, recognition softening her spine. In hushed tones, she quietly updated Shen Huiying on her brother's health. No new developments. His health seemed stagnant for now, which she reminded her was good news. After a moment's hesitation, she handed her a paper.

Shen Huiying frowned down at it. Then her expression shattered and she gasped, the paper falling from her fingers. It fluttered to the ground.

"...I thought it best you know," the stranger said, voice soft and saddened. "Usually, we require any who want to sign such things to reach out to family members. We suspected he didn't."

"T-Thank you," Shen Huiying said, stiffly. Silent tears slid down her cheeks. She bent down and stole the paper from the ground, very quickly cleaning up her face in the same smooth motion. By the time she stood up, her face was serene. "Can we see him?"

With a strained smile, the stranger nodded. She guided the three of them out of the room. Shen Huiying held the paper tight to her chest, jaw set. Her hands shook.

Cold white floors trailed down repeating hallways. They passed by someone walking in a loose gown, hand clutched around a metal pole with wheels and bags hanging from it. They were in a more decorated part of the hospital. There was more space between each doorway, and inside the rooms were luxurious. They finally stopped in front of a door that was left slightly ajar.

Something in Liu Qingge shook free.

There in a bed, Shen Yuan sat. His expression was withdrawn, eyes nearly unreadable. He was cleaned up in a new set of thin clothes. Beside him, a strange machine beeped consistently. Like a heartbeat. Shen Yuan held something in his hands. He drew it up to his face, eyes fluttering shut, and he pressed a kiss to it.

It was a jade hair piece.

The one Liu Qingge got him.

He was across the room in an instant, gathering Shen Yuan in his arms.

A startled gasp escaped Shen Yuan. Seconds later, arms snapped around him. “Q-Qingge!” He breathed. “What? How?”

The beeping quickened.

Liu Qingge couldn’t answer. All of his emotions slammed into him at once. Frustration. Terror. Rage. *Love.* He shook, teeth chattering. He had held it back for so long – on the curb, in the car, in the waiting room – and it all broke free from him now. *Now,* when Shen Yuan was safe. His Yuan was in his arms. His Yuan was *here.*

“Qingge?” Shen Yuan whispered, bewildered.

It was hopeless. He was *hopeless.* He loved this man too much. Far too much. This man was going to destroy him. His entire life, his heart, was in the hands of a fucking *imbecile*.

“Idiot,” Liu Qingge choked. He tried not to tighten his arms. This entire moment, holding his Yuan, was shameless. It was disrespectful. He could not stop. Nothing in this world would be able to stop him. He *needed* this. Needed to feel his Yuan’s warmth. He buried his nose into Shen Yuan’s hair and breathed him in.

The beeping grew faster.

A hand settled in the middle of his back, and Luo Binghe was there. “Yuan-gege, we found you!” he said, delightedly as if they were merely playing a game.

“Binghe? H-How?”

One of the arms around Liu Qingge dropped, moving to grasp onto the man beside him. They were a mess of limbs. Liu Qingge could not let go. It should be Luo Binghe who was shamelessly throwing himself into Shen Yuan’s arms. It should be that brat clinging onto him possessively and holding him tight.

Instead it was Liu Qingge.

I love him.

“We ran into some help,” Luo Binghe said. “Silly Yuan-gege! How were we supposed to go home if we don’t know where it is?”

“…I’m sorry,” Shen Yuan said, voice thick with guilt. “I am an idiot.”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge choked. Yes a hundred times. A thousand times. An idiot. A complete and utter dunce.

“We are all idiots sometimes, Yuan-gege.”

Yes. Also that. Absolutely that. Liu Qingge was a fucking moron. They were all so fucking stupid.

But they were each other’s idiots.

His Yuan. His Binghe.

It was hard to have a conversation when Liu Qingge was smothering Shen Yuan into his chest (good, he deserved it) so anything else teetered off. They stood there for a while, long enough for the beeping to slow and fall back into a normal pace.

It had to be a heartbeat.

Only when Liu Qingge was certain that he wouldn’t fall apart, he withdrew. He was still angry, so he took the jade hairpiece from Shen Yuan and put it back into his hair. The beeping was faster again. It absolutely was a heartbeat.

“…just a couple of bros, right ge?”

Shen Yuan startled. He threw a wild look past Liu Qingge, finally allowed to see the rest of the room. His eyes fell on his sister. A series of emotions tore across his face. He tightened his lips into a thin line, attempting to reel them all down. He didn’t respond, blinking rapidly.

Without a word, Liu Qingge drew back. He plucked the back of Luo Binghe’s jacket and hauled him back as well.

Stiffly, Shen Huiying drew towards him. “You look like shit.”

“Meimei,” Shen Yuan gasped. It was a raw thing, extracted from his soul. Soon he was grasping hands, yanking his sister close. She let out a small sound of surprise. It might not have been that long for her — days at most, right?

For him it had been years. What had he told them? That he thought he died? Up until this point, he would have thought that he never got a chance to say goodbye. Shen Yuan’s breath shuttered, and his hold was tight and shaky. He was struggling to keep himself together, standing on a slippery slope that would lead him to him breaking down.

Liu Qingge stepped forward, and he wrapped a hand around Shen Yuan's ankle. Thick blankets separated them, but it was enough.

A long breath escaped Shen Yuan and he shot him a grateful glance over his sister's shoulder. Breaking down now would worry his sister too much. She wouldn't understand.

"Ge?" Shen Huiying asked with a startled laugh. "You okay there?"

"Yeah," Shen Yuan answered. "You just stink. What sort of perfume is that?"

A startled cry of objection left Shen Huiying and she slammed a fist into her brother's shoulder. The two dissolved into a friendly spat of jabs and name-calling. With a little *humph,* Shen Huiying stepped away from her brother and turned her cheek. She crossed her arms. "You're a dick."

"Watch your language," Shen Yuan said with warning. He straightened out his shirt and wiped wrinkles from his blanket. "How did you all run into another?"

Shen Huiying floundered for a moment. "I… um. I saw them on the side of the road! They're super recognizable, san-ge."

With a strained expression, Shen Yuan looked from her to them. He didn't seem to enjoy the idea that they had spent so much time together.

Luo Binghe took the vacated area around his shizun as an invitation. He swept in and shamelessly sat on the bed and flopped down into Shen Yuan's lap. He tossed aside his hat and sunglasses, melting into his shizun. "Yuan-gege, that was so scary! We didn't know where you went! And we were so scared…"

The little machine started picking up again. Shen Yuan swallowed, skin flooding with color. "Binghe, this m…" He caught himself and quickly amended, "I am sorry. It just all happened so fast. I'll make sure to add my address onto the maps in my phone."

"Don't they have their own phones?" Shen Huiying asked. "You could just give them access to your apartment on the app." The corner of her lips curled viciously. "Since you're all obviously sleeping together."

Shen Yuan's mouth dropped open, and he stared at his sister in horror. "*Huiying!"*

Throwing her head back, Shen Huiying laughed. It was completely different than any of her earlier laughs. This was one unrestrained and inspired by that primal urge to completely destroy your sibling. "He calls you 'Yuan-gege!'"

"Because he's a-" Shen Yuan struggled, face twisting, "a-a brat!"

"Mn," Liu Qingge agreed, fighting his own smile.

"Yuan-gege," Luo Binghe whined, tears filling his eyes.

Shen Yuan was caught between the victorious grin on his sister's face and the very obvious fake-tears filling up in Luo Binghe's eyes. With a heavy sigh, Shen Yuan cleaned up his disciple's face and scorned, "Stop that. What is this? You're a man, aren't you?"

Stepping up to them, Liu Qingge pressed a hand against Luo Binghe's back and leaned over him to catch his eye. "He is right. You're a brat."

"Ming-gege!" Luo Binghe cried.

"It's okay, Luo Binghe! He calls me a brat all the time," Shen Huiying said, mischievously. "But he probably means it differently for you…"

"*Huiying!"* Shen Yuan snapped, horrified.

Luo Binghe (very dangerously) began to look thoughtful.

With a slight shake of his head, Liu Qingge straightened. He moved to go find a wall to lean against, when Luo Binghe turned over and patted the end of the bed. He… could sit there. On the same bed as both of them. It would be… somewhat shameless. He struggled with indecision, and glanced up at Shen Yuan to see his reaction.

Unfortunately, his shixiong was caught in another verbal war with his sister. "Who raised you!?"

His sister shot back, "Well it was you until you decided to be a little bitch and get sick."

"I was sick even before you were born, you brat!"

Ah, yeah. He definitely did use the term "brat" differently between his sister and Luo Binghe.

"Maybe you should just try getting better?" Shen Huiying said, flippantly. "Have you thought of that?"

"I might be hospitalized but I can still kick your ass!"

"Oh no, so scary," Shen Huiying taunted as she held up her hands. "My terminally ill brother is going to hit me with his noodle arms."

Terminally.

Terminally ill.

Liu Qingge stopped breathing.

Their spar continued, a volley of harsh words that had no intent to harm. Like fighting with swords so dull they never broke any skin. Liu Qingge stopped being able to pay attention. He no longer had a choice in whether or not he was standing. He sank onto the bed, at Shen Yuan's feet, and stared at the floor.

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe spoke, voice tied up so nicely and polite it couldn’t be anything other than fake. The verbal spar slowed down. At some point, Luo Binghe had sat up. He reached out one hand to clutch tightly onto Liu Qingge. It was the only sign that he wasn’t alright. His face expression was gentle, with the smile perfected. “You’re dying?”

Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: Hospital care, terminal illness, cliff hanger return to top ↩

Huiying - 慧莹 "bright, intelligent; intelligence" and "luster of gems; bright, lustrous"

Again, I did some research on the name though in the end, I unfortunately am only questionably fluent in two languages, and neither are useful in this case, so please forgive any mistakes on my part.

Also, SHY was 100% reading hardcore smut. Gotta figure out someway to cope when your older brother's an idiot, you know?

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

5.5k ish words, about 23 ish minute reading time.

Hey all! Some much needed talking happens in this chapter - take care of yourself. If it helps at all, it all gets better from here, I promise. Please heed the content warnings!

A huge shout out to bitchless_in_baihe. She really helped me with this chapter! I wanted to make sure things hit right, which is partially why this chapter is posted so late in the day.

Please check out her AO3 and her tumblr!

I think this marks the end of cliff hangers for a bit?

I also want go say, EVERYTHING discussed doesn't mean I believe it to be one thing or another. Every person has their own choices when it comes to their medical care, and their choices should not be judged or looked down upon.

Content Warning: see end of chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything felt too much like a dream. One moment he was a cultivator facing off an army, attempting to save his disciple from the prejudiced clutches of the cultivation world. The next he was in a hospital, seeing his sister for the first time in years. (But it hadn't been years, had it? It had only been a few days.) Something he had suppressed, something he had long since forced himself to bury, loosened in his chest.

His sister. His Yingying. His meimei.

It took every ounce of willpower not to just stand up and capture her in his arms. Maybe if he held her tight enough, time would rewind and she would be a child again and he would be healthier.

Shen Yuan did what he did best: he smothered the emotions, even as they threatened to choke him. It felt like willfully swallowing lungfulls of water.

It was too easy falling into banter with her. Too easy to be Shen Yuan, the third son who was always at home when his parents and brothers were not. Shen Yuan who raised his sister and sneaked her out of school on her birthday so they could go to an amusement park. He was the one she ran to when there was thunder. He was the one who she told her secrets to. He was the one who held her when she cried.

He forgot who else he was until he heard:

"A-Yuan."

Something inside of him broke. Like the faux-glass panel in front of a fire extinguisher. When was the last time *anyone* called him A-Yuan? Luo Binghe had before – in the forest. He had screamed his name in a way he never had before. Raw, unfiltered, and desperate.

"You're dying?"

The mood of the room shifted. Shen Yuan turned his attention to the two men that sat at the foot of his bed. They were holding on to another. Liu Qingge looked sick. His lips were pulled into a troubled, tight line.

Luo Binghe held a politician's grace with ease, though that was perhaps the fault in it. It was too perfect.

"Uh," Shen Yuan started, his heart sinking. He hated this conversation. Most of the time whenever he got to this conversation with someone, it was the pity that was the worst. Either he had to shrug it off and make them feel better because *he* was dying, or he had to pretend that their words of wisdom actually mattered and made him feel better. They didn't. Words didn't fix this. It had been a very long time since he had this conversation with someone who cared.

(He would be a fool if he didn't admit that at the very least, Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe *cared.)*

A sharp laugh cut from Huiying. "Of fucking course you didn't tell them."

Shen Yuan flinched and turned to her to warn her about her language. The words fizzled out on his tongue.

His sister was furious. Her hands were tight knots at her sides. Rage splotched her skin pink. "King of 'conceal don't feel,' right?" Huiying pinned him down with a glare.

There had been a few times that Shen Yuan had seen his sister angry – he raised her, after all. But this? This was a whole new level. His stomach sank. "Yingying?"

"Can't bother *anyone*," Huiying said with an empty laugh. "Right? Just sit up in your big empty tower with your stupid web novels and wait to die. Can't feel anything that way, right?"

"Ying-mei." Shen Yuan tried gentling his voice. He didn't quite understand the issue here. No, he had not told either Liu Qingge or Luo Binghe. What was the point? He would have

dealt with it when there *became* a point-

“Where were you when you went AWOL?” Huiying asked. She straightened with righteous fury.

The question felt like a trap. Throat drying, Shen Yuan said, “I told you. I was on vacation, meeting these two.”

“That is what you said,” Huiying sneered.

Something wasn’t right. Shen Yuan started to shift his legs, pulling away the blanket so he could escape and catch his sister. “What does that mean, Ying-mei?”

“Who the *fuck* do you think found you!?”

Shen Yuan stilled. His stomach dropped. That was the worst part when he thought about his death – who would have to come across his body. He had always assumed it would be whoever he hired to clean his apartment. Someone who was mostly a stranger. *Not* his sister.

Tears shined in Huiying’s eyes, a dam ready to burst. She was as good with her emotions as Shen Yuan was – which was not at all. She was too prideful. Like him. Catching her breath, she wrapped her arms around herself. “I thought you were dead. You were lying there – and you were *cold,* san-ge. You-” Her breath hitched and she caught it behind a hand. She turned away.

“Meimei,” Shen Yuan soothed. He tore away the heart monitor and started to slip out of the bed.

“No!” Huiying snapped at him. “You can’t hug this away! Fuck you! *Fuck you!”* She snapped. “What the fuck, Yuan!? You almost *died* and you try to cover it up?”

Shen Yuan clamped his mouth shut. His hands tightened around the fabric of his blanket and his bare feet hung off the bed. The muscles in his legs quivered, not quite ready to bear his weight. He did not want to have this conversation here. Not with Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe in the room. He closed his eyes and breathed in through his nose. “Huiying.”

A piece of paper flew at him. It bounced off his chest. He opened his eyes and watched it roll across the floor.

“You’re supposed to talk to your friends or family first,” Huiying said, voice low and cold. “Before you sign a DNR.”

Oh. Shen Yuan forgot how to breathe. He stared at the paper, sweat gathering on the back of his neck. He had asked about that, hadn’t he? It seemed like a lifetime ago. “That’s supposed to be confidential-“

“*Confidential?!”* Huiying screamed. “Fuck confidentiality when my brother’s trying to kill himself!”

A startled breath sucked in through Luo Binghe's mouth. His calm facade was cracking. Tears started to spill onto his cheeks.

Fuck.

"Huiying!" Shen Yuan snapped. "It's not signed *yet.* I was just looking into it."

"Oh, good, so my brother is just looking into suicide. That's cool."

"It's *not* suicide!" Shen Yuan felt his blood boil. "Don't you dare equate it to that. I was looking into options, that's all. I was thinking of you and da-ge and er-ge, I didn't *want* you guys to have to keep throwing away your entire life because I had another bad episode."

"And what about what *we* wanted, Yuan?" Huiying asked. "You keep deciding that for us, but you never *fucking* asked-"

"I never wanted to die!" Shen Yuan shouted, tearing up from the bed. His knees buckled and he caught himself on the wall. He didn't realize how much he meant that, not until he said it. He didn't *want* to die. He never did. Not in this world. Not the other. Emotions were raw, an iron brand burning into his flesh. He could hardly breathe past it. His lips trembled. It poured out of his mouth, desperate and vicious. "You think I *want* to be a burden?! You think I *enjoy* watching the people I care about stop their lives, again and again and *again?* All because I had yet *another* fucking episode?! You think-"

"I want your burden!" Huiying screamed. She gave up all pretenses of holding herself together. "I *want* it. I want my san-ge back! I want my brother who didn't chase his death like a fucking finish line!" Her voice broke into a sob and she tried to catch her breath.

Shen Yuan's anger flickered out like a snuffed candle.

Frustrated, she wiped at her face with the backs of her hands. "You gave up. You *gave up!* You moved out, you hid, and let yourself *wither away* like you were already dead. You think you're being this big hero trying to take away my pain, but you're just taking away my *brother."*

He took a step towards her.

Huiying snarled like a cornered dog and stepped back. "No! You don't get to fix this with a fucking hug and a head pat, because *fuck* you. You killed my san-ge."

"Yingying-"

"Just admit you're a coward. You're not trying to save anyone but yourself."

"*Meimei!"*

His sister fled to the door. She didn't look back as she tore out of the room, leaving nothing behind but Shen Yuan and the aftermath of their argument. The room fell silent. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth in an attempt to regain some control. Torrents of emotions burned the backs of his eyes. He thought it was unfair that she ran, because he

couldn't do the same. He stared down at his feet, feeling too much all at once to be able to look at the other two in the room. There was a quiet, strangled noise; the sound of Luo Binghe trying to smother his sob. It did nothing for the tearing pain in his chest.

Liu Qingge spoke first, "So, you do it here too."

The cold delivery might as well have been a slap. Shen Yuan flinched, shoulders drawing up towards his ears. His fingers curled, nails biting into the palms of his hands. He did not answer, scared that his voice might waver. He needed to pull himself back together. Too many pieces of himself were falling to the floor. Grabbing one made another slip through his fingers.

"What is a DNR?"

Shen Yuan could not answer. He was too afraid that if he opened his mouth, something like a sob might fall out. He wrenched that feeling back, and tried to shove it down his throat.

An annoyed *tsk* escaped Liu Qingge. He stepped past him and walked across the room to grab the crumpled paper. The distance was too far to even try and stop him, seeing as Shen Yuan could barely stand when using the wall as a crutch. The war god unfolded the paper and scowled down at its contents.

"Do not resuscitate," Luo Binghe croaked from the bed.

Shen Yuan startled and whipped around to stare at him.

The man had Shen Yuan's phone in hand, fingers scrolling as he read. He choked on his disbelief, face twisting in horror. His reddened eyes flicked up and their gazes met. He looked at him as if he saw him in a new light.

Shen Yuan *hated* it. It wasn't fair. Luo Binghe didn't need to look at him *like that.* Because it wasn't like that!

"Explain!" Liu Qingge snapped.

Swallowing the urge to snap back at him, Shen Yuan forced himself to levelly say, "They… wouldn't help. If I stopped breathing. Or if my heart stopped. They…"

"You're asking them to kill you," Liu Qingge clarified.

"No!" Shen Yuan threw a glare at the war god. His back fell against the wall to keep himself on his feet. Anger was easier. Anger was *safer.*

"Shizun," Luo Binghe choked, the single word broken with misery, "you're asking them to *let you die."*

Jaw clenched, Shen Yuan looked away from both of them. He glared at the doorway, using his breaths to try and corral every last emotion back down.

"You're giving up," Liu Qingge said, dryly.

"*Giving up?"* Shen Yuan snarled. He threw a vicious glare at his shidi.

A surprised gasp escaped Luo Binghe. He had never seen his shizun *this* mad. Not like this. Not at anyone. The closest might have been the skinner demon, and even then Shen Yuan had managed to wrangle himself down into a level of calm.

He couldn't. Not now. Not with everything spilling out of his control. Not with how his sister left in tears. Not with how they both looked at him.

"You don't understand-" Shen Yuan hissed.

"What else is there?" Liu Qingge growled, lifting the paper as if it explained everything – as if it condemned him.

"How *dare* you. Fuck - *fuck you!"* Shen Yuan shouted.

Liu Qingge's eyes widened.

"You don't get it." Shen Yuan tore from the wall, throwing an accusing finger at Liu Qingge. "How *could* you!? Everything, *everything,* you have ever wanted, you got it. You've never had to worry about being physically able, you've just *done it!* You've never had to be weak! You've always been strong!"

A muscle in Liu Qingge's jaw jumped as his teeth clenched. He glowered. "Not everything. Not always. I worked hard."

"There's no 'working hard' for this!" Shen Yuan cried. "There is *nothing* I can do, nothing *anyone* can do!" He reached Liu Qingge and shoved weakly against his chest. "I would rather die-" his breath hiccuped and horrifyingly his eyes started to burn, "-than have you resent me." He blinked against the tears that threatened him. "Because I'm weak."

Something in Liu Qingge's expression gave way. It softened his face minutely. "Yuan-"

"Shut up. *Shut up,"* Shen Yuan snarled. "Don't tell me it's not a burden, because it is. It is. I took away my brothers' childhoods because of this. I tried to be there for my sister, but she's going to lose me and there's *nothing* I can do about that. And-" He tore away from Liu Qingge, hands shaking. "I am hurting them. I am hurting you. I am hurting *everyone.* Just because I am *alive."*

"Yuan." Liu Qingge caught his wrist, fingers trembling.

"It's not just here, either," Shen Yuan said, coldly. He glared down at the floor, unable to meet either of their gazes. It was petulant and childish, but he couldn't stop himself from bitterly saying, "I'm just a burden."

"Shizun," Luo Binghe tried to speak, voice swallowed by his sadness. His quiet wail sounded something like a "no."

"Without A Cure," Shen Yuan continued, gritting his teeth. "Mu Qingfang spent how many nights trying to find a solution? He blames himself for not being good enough when it's a

stupid plot device and *my own* fault! And Qingge," his voice wavered, "you had to uproot your *life* because of me. You can't go anywhere you please anymore, and instead have to periodically cleanse my meridians. You have to babysit me whenever I need to go *anywhere-"*

"Shen Yuan."

"-it's unfair to you! You shouldn't have to-"

"*A-Yuan."*

Shen Yuan's breath caught. He turned to stare at Liu Qingge, eyes wide.

"It is not about…" Liu Qingge struggled, trying to find the right words. "It is not about giving up. It's about not… saying anything." He frowned. "Just talk about it."

Throat closing, Shen Yuan stared up at the man before him. He felt as if he were walking on the edge of a crumbling cliff; one misstep he would fall off and break apart. "With Huan Hua and the other sects… we didn't have time. You were with Binghe, and *everyone* was turning against him." His expression darkened. "I won't let any of them hurt him."

"Mn."

Luo Binghe tried to move from the bed to join them. He made it a few steps before he collapsed to their feet, broken with grief. It almost seemed like he was trying to speak, unable to through his tears.

"Binghe…" Shen Yuan eased down onto his knees. He reached to soothe his disciple, but found himself tangled in a pair of arms the next second. With a shaky tut, he wrapped his disciple up in a hug and soothed a hand over a mess of curls. "This master… I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Don't," Luo Binghe pleaded. "Don't… don't let go. Don't sign the DNR. This Binghe is sorry, this Binghe will do better-"

"Binghe is *not* at fault," Shen Yuan said, sternly. "If you two would just *listen!* You don't! You get upset and interrupt."

With a long sigh, Liu Qingge dropped down beside them. He rubbed between Luo Binghe's shoulder blades, and he met Shen Yuan's gaze. "Alright. We're listening. Speak."

Now that Shen Yuan had *all* of the attention, it was hard to. He wished he had a fan to hide behind, anything other than his disciple who clung onto him and cried into his chest. His heart sank. He hated that he was hurting both of them. "...I had thought things were going to follow the book," he said, haltingly. Luo Binghe's arms tightened around him and it ached in a pleasant way. "I know Binghe wouldn't hurt me," Shen Yuan soothed. "I know now. But… I didn't then. I had prepared a back-up plan. A way to… escape."

Liu Qingge, as promised, did not interrupt and just listened.

“Sun and Moon Dew Mushrooms,” Shen Yuan continued, speaking softly. “They can grow a human body. Before all of this, the plan was… to let things take its course. Then after I die, I would… revive in that body.”

The war god’s face twitched as if he wanted to say something, but he forced himself to keep his tongue tied. Instead, he nodded for Shen Yuan to go on.

“When the Old Palace Master exposed Luo Binghe, I remembered the mushroom body. The plan was to let myself… take all the blame,” Shen Yuan continued. “Then revive as someone else.”

With a raised eyebrow, Liu Qingge silently asked if that was the end of it.

Shen Yuan nodded.

“You will listen now,” Liu Qingge told him. “Get back in bed.” He hauled both Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan up, and herded them back towards the hospital bed. There, he forcefully tucked Shen Yuan in. Anger burned in his eyes. “It’s a stupid plan.”

“*Qingge-”*

“No.” Liu Qingge glared at him. “It’s your turn to listen. So, listen. It’s stupid. Even if everyone believed it, what makes you think they will be okay with a heavenly demon running around?”

Shen Yuan’s mouth opened.

“Do not answer,” Liu Qingge growled. “They won’t. Not after the last one.” He breathed out through his nose and crossed his arms. His eyes bore into Shen Yuan. “Now *all the sects* are after you *and* Binghe.”

Throat dry, Shen Yuan sat back and waited. He reached out a hand to pat Luo Binghe’s head, mostly to comfort himself. His disciple cried silently, flopping down beside him. Desperately, he clung onto his shizun.

“I’m… so angry with you,” Liu Qingge said with shaking fury.

The honesty of it punched Shen Yuan in the chest. To his horror, tears started to crawl up his throat and burn his eyes. He clenched his jaw and tried to swallow them back down.

“What makes it okay for you to give up *everything?”* the war god continued. “What about the people who love you? What about *us?”*

“Shizun has his peak, the peak lords, and his disciples,” Luo Binghe added, sniffling. His voice was thick. “And so many others. He has so many people who need him. So many who would miss him.”

“Mn.” Liu Qingge stepped closer, placing a hand beside Shen Yuan’s head as he leaned in. He searched his eyes. “Trust us. Trust the sect. You are not expendable. You matter to us.”

It was hard to breathe. Shen Yuan's eyes stung. To his horror, his breath hitched.

"A-Yuan," Liu Qingge said, his expression softening. His skin blossomed with a blush. He forced the words out through his teeth, "I like… helping you." He no longer looked him in the eye, but he did not back off.

"Shizun never asks for anything," Luo Binghe murmured. "Ever. Getting to help Shizun makes us happy. Really happy. We want Shizun to ask for more, and to give him more. We want to give Shizun *everything."*

Liu Qingge, embarrassed, affirmed with, "Mn." With a deep breath, the war god steeled himself. He met Shen Yuan's eyes again. "...you." His eyes fell shut. He struggled, face reddening with every passing second. "Lean on me," he whispered, it almost sounded like a plea.

"Yuan-gege," Luo Binghe moved. He sat up to take Shen Yuan's hand and clutch it in both of his own, holding it to his chest. "We want your burden. We want you to take from us*."*

"...all of it," Liu Qingge continued, "We want it all."

"The happiness," Luo Binghe said, "the love, the laughter…" His hands tightened on Shen Yuan. "And the pain. The anger."

"If you die, you *better* leave a mark," Liu Qingge growled.

"I-If Shizun dies," Luo Binghe said, his voice growing watery again, "it will hurt. But we *want* it to. Because Shizun matters. You make up so much of our lives. We care so much about you."

"It will always hurt. No matter what. But at least we will have the shape of you rather than just the footprints you leave behind." Liu Qingge hesitated. "So burden us. Lean on us. Please."

Shen Yuan didn't know what to say. It was unfair. He blinked rapidly to fight back tears, startled at his own lack of control. His throat tightened. He wanted to escape – to get up and find a place where he could pull himself back together. The tip of his nose started to prickle. His breath shuddered. People only cared for so long until it got exhausting. Look at his parents. He had taken so much in his youth. He had to stop doing that, didn't he? Shen Yuan just had to make them *understand.* But it wasn't his time to speak yet. He shut his eyes and turned his head, trying to hold it all down.

They will get tired.

They will decide it's too much.

They-

A hand caressed his cheek. The touch was tender, comforting and warm. "Stop running away," Liu Qingge whispered. "Trust us. Talk to us."

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe croaked. He drew in closer. After a second’s hesitation, he said, “Shizun… Shizun’s father is wrong.”

Shen Yuan stopped breathing.

“A-Yuan *is* important. A-Yuan is *worth* caring for.”

His control broke. A sob escaped past his lips. Shen Yuan tried to curl up and hide, to choke down the embarrassing sounds of his own tears, and he failed. He was mortified by the whine that escaped through his teeth. His whole body shook. Why was he acting this way!? He wasn’t a child. But he couldn’t stop. He was surrounded on all sides. Arms tightened around his waist and his shoulders. Comforting hands rubbed circles on his back, which worked well as opening a floodgate.

Shen Yuan choked on his sobs, fighting to breathe as tears scorched down his cheeks. He felt like a child wailing after a skinned knee.

He hadn’t cried this hard since-

He wasn’t sure if he had ever cried like this.

Not when he had learned that his life would never be normal. Not when he realized what it meant to be terminally ill. Not even when he woke up in another man’s body with another name.

He felt as if he were stripped bare.

He was suffocating.

It was like jumping off a cliff blindfolded. His safety nets had been torn away, leaving him flailing and falling. But at the bottom of that cliff, there were two people there ready to help him land.

Even if it hurt, he wouldn’t be alone.

“Sorry,” Shen Yuan choked out. “I’m sorry.”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge murmured, face pressed into his hair.

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghue whispered his name like a prayer, head resting on his shoulder. “A-Yuan.”

Neither of them let him hide, even as he tried to curl and push them away. In the end, he cried into Liu Qingge’s chest with Luo Binghe curled up on his side and holding him close. There was nowhere to escape. Nothing else to do except to let go. He stopped fighting. He stopped running. He leaned on them, both of them, and trusted them to keep holding on.

Eventually, the tears stopped. The three of them had maneuvered to squeeze onto the bed. Liu Qingge leaned back against the headboard beside Shen Yuan, arm around his shoulders with a chin perched on his head. Somehow, the war god was also caught in Luo Binghe's desperate hold; the disciple lay on top of Shen Yuan with his face buried in his stomach. The weight held Shen Yuan down, anchoring him to a sense of calm. He felt tender – the way a wound does after you clean out the infection. It might hurt and bleed for a while, but at least now it had the chance to heal.

All three of them were quiet. Shen Yuan was exhausted. Both of his hands worked through Luo Binghe's curls, turning it into a massive frizzy mess. A big part of him was embarrassed. He had broken apart and acted so childish in front of both of these men, yet here they were quietly holding him without complaint. He knew that there was more that they needed to talk about. Personally, he would rather strip naked and run down the halls of the hospital.

In the reflection of the window, Shen Yuan studied all three of them. As he guessed, his face was a puffy mess. He wasn't even going to touch on how humiliating that was! Especially in comparison to Luo Binghe, who had practically been crying since he stepped foot in the room. He wore tears like an accessory. The red rimming of his eyes only accentuated the dark depths of his irises. The only one completely untouched was Liu Qingge — he hadn't shed a single tear during the entire fiasco.

(Also… untouched metaphorically. All of them were touching… quite a bit. There was a lot of touching happening.)

Liu Qingge caught him staring in the reflection. Their eyes met.

Face burning, Shen Yuan cleared his throat. He did *not* want to talk about what just happened. No, thank you! He quietly croaked, "They won't let you two spend the night."

Luo Binghe stirred.

The war god shifted just enough to comfortably watch Shen Yuan's face in the reflection of the window. "Mn?"

"You guys will have to go back to the apartment without me. I'll try to get out as soon as I can, but it might not be until tomorrow afternoon," Shen Yuan continued, his face burning underneath his stare. "I'll show you guys how to order groceries, if you want. And also add the address of the apartment to the maps on my phone."

"To the hospital too," Luo Binghe mumbled. His voice was hardly audible the way he had his face smashed against his stomach. The thin hospital gown did not do much, and it felt like his lips were trailing over his skin.

Shen Yuan ignored that part, just like he was ignoring so many other things, and patted his disciple's head. "Okay."

Eyes narrowing, Liu Qingge stared Shen Yuan down. He raised a single eyebrow.

Okay, so what if Shen Yuan wasn't being as subtle as he wanted to be? He pressed his lips into a thin line and was too flustered to keep meeting his gaze.

With a thoughtful sound, Liu Qingge squeezed his shoulders. "…there is more to discuss."

Fuck! Shidi, please have mercy!! Mercy!!!!

"…later."

Shen Yuan couldn't stop himself from letting out a sigh of relief.

Snorting, the war god rolled his eyes.

The conversation fell back into silence. It wasn't necessarily uncomfortable. Shen Yuan was grounded both by the weight on his head and around his shoulders, and the body that tied down his legs. It was… nice. He could almost fall asleep. His fingers started tying braids into his disciple's hair.

With a frown, Liu Qingge interrupted the peace with, "The clothes were still in the car."

"My sister probably had them dropped off or something. It's fine," Shen Yuan said, wiping a hand through the air. "She has the key to my apartment."

"Mn." Liu Qingge watched him with an expression that was difficult to read.

A surge of shyness blossomed in Shen Yuan. He took out his phone to distract himself. "Uh… let's get you two set up."

They spent some time figuring out logistics. First, the maps. He added both addresses. Then he taught both of them how to use the phone and the internet. (Why was PIDW up on the browser?? He must have left it up…) They learned how to get a ride, order food, and everything else Shen Yuan could think of to make sure that they wouldn't be left stranded again.

Luo Binghe pouted the entire time. He kept trying to figure out ways for them to stay. At one point, he was determined to try and convince the nurses to *let* them stay.

No, thank you! Let's not bring the protagonist's wrath or charm on the nurses, please!

After the tenth attempt at talking his disciple down, Shen Yuan groaned. "*Binghe.*"

With a humored tilt to his lips, Liu Qingge shifted. He pulled away, leaving Shen Yuan's side cold, and caught his chin between his finger and thumb. "Yuan is okay spending the night alone?" He searched his eyes.

Um. Hello?? Why so intense!?

"I've spent *hundreds* of nights alone, Qingge," Shen Yuan said with a rueful smile. Ignore the fact that he was blushing, please!

A frown settled on Liu Qingge's lips. "Just because you have done it before does not mean that it is alright now."

"Stop!" Shen Yuan blurted, flustered. He chased away the hand that held him and threw a sharp glare. "I am not some maiden! Stop treating me like I'm going to break! I am fine!"

Liu Qingge snorted.

"Shizun is the strongest," Luo Binghe mumbled, face still smothered. "It is this disciple who is too weak."

"Now it just sounds like you're placating me," Shen Yuan said, crossing his arms. He knew he was being prickly, but so what!? He was fine! They were being fussy for no reason!

Liu Qingge stared into his eyes for an extended amount of time. It was tense. It almost felt like some sort of messed up staring contest, except both of them were blinking. After an indeterminate amount of time, his shidi nodded. "Binghe," he turned his attention to the wet mess of a man. "We can prepare for when your shizun returns."

The suggestion stirred Luo Binghe. He pulled away just enough to meet his shishu's eyes, intrigued by the suggestion.

An unspoken conversation passed between the two of them. Liu Qingge raised his eyebrows ever so slightly, and the glimmer in Luo Binghe's eyes turned into a full inferno.

Oh, no.

What the hell were these two planning!?

"Is there a limit to how much can be spent?" Liu Qingge asked, turning his attention back to Shen Yuan.

Normally, he would say no. Instead, he hesitated with a distrustful squint. He glanced between the two of them. "...don't just go off and buy a house or something."

Amusement lit Liu Qingge's expression. His arm still laid loosely around Shen Yuan's shoulders. He raised an eyebrow. "A house is your limit?"

"...maybe," Shen Yuan said. He looked between the two of them. "I don't know what you're planning."

"Food," Liu Qingge answered.

There seemed to be more to that. But when Shen Yuan squinted his eyes, neither moved to confess to anything.

They still had some time to kill before the two were kicked out, so Shen Yuan took out his phone and showed the two of them the wonders of "*cooking shows."* Liu Qingge settled back in, tucking Shen Yuan against his side. It was odd to be so smothered – with the war god on one side and the demon emperor weighing down his legs. It was… nice. Really nice.

Addictively nice. It didn't matter that his legs were falling asleep. He felt at ease with their doting.

It scared him.

His mind kept drifting back to that strange dream: the one at the park. His stomach lurched, and color flooded his skin. He tried to ignore the way Liu Qingge rested his cheek against the top of his head, and he also tried to ignore how Luo Binghe's legs threaded with his own.

It was like trying to ignore a flashing neon sign.

His heart pounded incessantly. He felt Luo Binghe shift, his hand sliding against his lower back. Liu Qingge's hand drew down the length of his arm, fingers stuttering when they hit bare skin.

This was… bad.

It was really bad.

Fuck.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: Hospital care, terminal illness, DNR, comparing something to suicide, an argument return to top ↩

LBH absolutely does know what the password to the phone is, BTW. Will he keep asking SY and LQG to open it until someone tells him? Yes, yes he will.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Oops... this chapter is 7.5k which is about a 30 minute reading time.

Everything is beginning to go up from here. We're beginning to work through more character faults! This chapter is very LQG x LBH centric.

Content Warning: Dark thoughts, struggles with self-worth, the Luo Binghe special, and... (spoiler ahead:) some sexual content. There will be a summary at the end of the chapter.

Things after "(Almost everything.)" get a little spicy, so you're free to skip to the summary if you're not here for that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe had made a big mistake. He lay in bed, listening to the flutter of his shizun's heart, while staring at a phone screen. On it, there was a mad dash of people fluttering around what was referred to as a "grocery store" and they were competing on making better meals. He was intrigued. His interest did not snuff the loud hammering of regret in his heart. Every time his mind wandered back to his choices, his eyes burned and a fresh new set of tears wanted to leak from his eyes. He had thought that this world would be better.

He was wrong.

His shizun was *dying* here.

The argument replayed in his mind, starting from Shen Huiying's sharp words then winding down to Liu Qingge and his shizun's conversation. It ended with his shizun falling apart. Guilt throbbed, growing like a tumor between his lungs. His lower lip quivered. He had made himself promise that he wouldn't hurt his shizun again, but look at what he had done.

Now his shizun was trapped in a body that would wither away. He held his breath so he wouldn't sob. It was his fault. What would happen if his shizun died in this world? Would his soul find its way back to his body in the other world? Or would Shen Qingqiu be left as a husk?

His hands tightened on the fabric. One of his arms had long since gone numb underneath Shen Yuan. The other caught Liu Qingge's side and smashed all three of them together. No

one had grumbled at his clingy behavior. He kept his breaths even and quiet, to hide his incessant crying. His shizun noticed. A hand found his cheek and fingers cleaned away fresh tears. Shizun left his hand on Luo Binghe's cheek, petting his skin soothingly.

The soothing motion somehow made Luo Binghe want to cry *more.* He didn't deserve this – holding onto both of his beloved. The tumor of guilt was turning into a thick sludge that flooded his lungs. He ached to tell them the truth – of what he had done. But at this point, bringing it up would only start another emotionally draining conversation that no one was ready for. It would have to wait. For now, he would have to fester with his regret. He tried to scramble together a plan. He needed to figure out what to do once they got back to the other world – because at this point, they did not have a choice, they *would* go back. He would make sure of that now. *Nothing* would take his shizun away from him. Not even some other worldly illness.

Someone knocked at the door to the room, and suddenly it was time for them to leave. Luo Binghe could not help it. He did not want to.

How could he willingly leave his shizun when he was trapped and alone in some stranger's care?

He clung onto his shizun like a child, and the nurses cooed at his behavior and promised him that they would take good care of "his boyfriend." He liked that. He liked Shen Yuan being *something* of his.

"Boyfriend" was something he was going to look up later on the internet.

As well as "asexual."

Maybe even "gay?"

Liu Qingge, unfairly, found out Luo Binghe's biggest weakness: touch. His shishu corralled him in a tight hold, and only with that distraction were they able to leave the room. As they walked down the hall, Liu Qingge kept hold of his hand. It was probably to make sure that Luo Binghe wouldn't change his mind and try to find a way back to his shizun.

Little did Liu Qingge know how much that hold meant — Luo Binghe would never willingly break it. His hand tightened on his shishu, and he threaded their fingers together. He studied his shishu's reaction out of the corner of his eye. A blush started to color Liu Qingge's cheeks, but he did not balk at the intimacy. Instead, he squeezed back reassuringly.

Luo Binghe did not deserve this. He was selfish and greedy. He knew he was taking advantage of his shishu's kindness. He should let go. He just couldn't bring himself to do it.

He wasn't sure if he would ever be able to.

“Food will be here soon,” Liu Qingge said, frowning down at the phone screen as both of them wandered into the apartment. The car ride back was mostly just the two of them bent together, figuring out what sort of foods that Shen Yuan could and could not eat. It was an ambitious menu, which had required intensive research. Substitutions, alternate proteins, fats, and spices.Not to mention, there were plenty of new culinary techniques that were only made possible by this world’s advancement in technology.

Luo Binghe was excited.

They had ordered many new things: food, cookware, other items to make the place feel more homely, and… things. Some of those things Luo Binghe managed to sneak in with his shishu distractedly looking out the window. And those things he would not only have to grab the delivery before anyone else did, but he would have to find a way to hide it after.

Right at the entryway to the apartment, there was a massive pile of bags. It was their clothes. That day, wandering around the city and shopping for clothes, had seemed so long ago. It was odd to think that in this world, it had happened just that morning. So much had changed since then.

“Looks like we had a visitor,” Luo Binghe said, attempting to lift his voice with some cheer. It sounded too artificial.

Liu Qingge frowned. He plucked up a piece of paper that sat atop the bags. Thin characters scrawled across it. He narrowed his eyes, and then handed it over to Luo Binghe.

Curious, he took it and read it.

Should the wall bear any cracks, it is you who shall fall.

- Both his er-ge and da-ge.

The threat was clever – seeing as “Yuan” could mean wall. Luo Binghe smirked ruefully. “Maybe it *wasn’t* Shen Huiying who dropped these off.”

“The driver,” Liu Qingge said, thoughtful.

“Mn!” Luo Binghe caught onto what his shishu was referencing almost immediately – the man who drove them to the hospital with Shen Huiying. “He did look a little like Shizun…” He wondered why the man hadn’t introduced himself if that was the case. The more he thought about it, the driver had paid special attention to them. Even more so after Liu Qingge had admitted that both of them cared deeply for Shen Yuan.

Sighing through his nose, Liu Qingge dropped into a crouch beside the bags and started to paw through them.

“Ah! Ming-gege, here!” Luo Binghe threw himself down beside him and quickly pulled out a set of lounge wear for both himself and his shishu.

When he went to hand a set over, he saw his shishu watching him with an almost-smile. His cheeks were pleasantly pink. With a raised eyebrow, Liu Qingge asked, “It’s ‘Ming-gege’

now?”

Luo Binghe paused. Ah, he had done that by accident, hadn’t he? Up until this point, he had been more respectful to his shishu since… well. Since his failed confession in the bathrooms. In front of others from this realm, he was forced to use another address for Liu Qingge. Now, the two of them were alone. He had slipped up. His eyes fell and he glanced to the side. “Sorry, Shishu.”

With a sigh, Liu Qingge shoved him.

It startled Luo Binghe, and threw him off balance enough that he fell into a sprawl. He gaped up at his shishu, who watched him with a playful glint in his eyes.

“Brat.”

“Shishu!” Luo Binghe cried. His chest was warm, even as he exaggerated a pout. He had to smother a smile.

Shaking his head, Liu Qingge rose to his feet and left him to change in the bathroom.

Luo Binghe let that interaction replay in his mind, distracting himself from his bad decisions, while he organized the rest of their clothes to be washed. His stupid, selfish, and greedy heart could not help but be hopeful. The war god had played with him, with affection softening the hard lines of his face. Luo Binghe’s skin was pleasantly warm.

Stop, he scorned his heart. *It’s not like that.*

Once he finished sorting the clothes, he went to figure out how to actually wash them. He came across the metal monstrosities that would clean their clothes for them and paused. After an intensive staring contest, he decided to wait until he could look up on how to tame them. Shishu still had the phone on him.

With that task done, he quickly threw himself into the next. Work helped him run away from his growing remorse. When he didn’t think about it, he could trick himself into thinking that it didn’t hurt to breathe and that his eyes weren’t burning. He dove into Shen Yuan’s closet and began organizing it. There was a lot of space and not a lot of clothes to fill it. By the time Liu Qingge found him, he had made room for both his shishu and himself to store their clothes. There was something solidifying about it — like carving their names in something that belonged to Shen Yuan. He wanted to make an imprint on his life, to never leave any doubt that they *belonged.*

“The food is here,” Liu Qingge said, arms crossed as he considered the closet. He still wore a light sweatshirt over his clothes which was a shame, though the loose cloth of his sweatpants clung favorably to his thighs and… other elements.

It was distracting. Considering the fact that Luo Binghe still knelt in the middle of the closet, he was at a *direct line* of sight with his shishu’s waist. He scorned himself inwardly, and tried to pluck his eyes away from his shishu’s assets. Their eyes met. Apparently he had *not* been subtle; there was a slight flush to his shishu’s face with his lips drawn reflexively in a frown.

Heart dropping, Luo Binghe was about to utter an apology. He felt a hint of shame warm his cheeks. His tongue stilled once he noticed that there was no real reproach in his shishu's expression.

With a hesitant smile, he said, "Thanks, Shishu! Can this Binghe ask a favor…?" He sidled closer and wet his lips, knowing how he would look at this angle. He had promised himself to respect his shishu, but it was far too easy to tease him. Especially already being on his knees.

Liu Qingge stared down at him, flush deepening. His body tensed. "What?"

Letting his eyelids drop in a hazy, suggestive way, Luo Binghe leaned closer. There was something heady in the war god's eyes. Was he thinking about what Luo Binghe could do for him, on his knees? Hands curling into fists, he tried to remind himself that he was trying to be *respectful.* He shouldn't press or make his shishu uncomfortable. Taking in a breath, he smiled pleasantly and asked, "Can Shishu look up how one might use the washing contraption?"

A tiny voice worried in the back of his mind that he might never get the chance to be *anything* to either his shishu or shizun. It told him that he would be left behind. He tried to tell himself that was alright. As long as he got to see the both of them happy.

Unfortunately, he was selfish. He wanted them both. Needed them both. His nails dug further into his skin.

It took a few moments for Liu Qingge to process the question. "Y-You!" He sputtered. "Brat!" He lifted a foot and slammed it down on Luo Binghe's chest, knocking him down to the floor. With that, he turned and left. He had Shen Yuan's phone in hand and had already unlocked it.

Luo Binghe had to swallow down a laugh. Choosing to be dramatic about the pain, he rollled on the ground and wheezed. His shishu ignored him. He dragged himself after him, crawling back into the main living area. There, he continued on with the theatrics, groaning and wheezing until he saw his shishu roll his eyes and fail to dim his smile. Liu Qingge truly was unfairly beautiful. His smiles turned his eyes into crescents, and made the depths of his eyes glitter.

Grinning, Luo Binghe lay on the ground and watched the war god. He was content, just for a moment, to study that quiet smile.

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge stepped over to him and hauled him off the ground. "Dramatic." Then he punched Luo Binghe in the side.

It didn't hurt. Luo Binghe laughed and side-stepped another punch. He was surprised at how easy it was to laugh and smile, especially because it was *the War God of Bai Zhan* who was inspiring him to do so. He quickly surrendered, bowing and stepping away. As fun as it would be to tackle his shishu to the ground, there were plenty of things to be done. He threw himself into the next task at hand: sorting the food.

Piles upon piles of bags sat at the entryway. It was a ridiculous amount if one considered that there were only three men in this household, and not three generations of mouths to feed. Ridiculous, if you didn't count the fact that his shizun had *nothing* in his cupboards except a few scant cans and some sort of packaged noodles. It was an affront to any kitchen. There were very few perishables, like Shen Yuan was awaiting the need to leave his apartment for an extended period of time.

Luo Binghe tried not to think of why.

He failed.

All of his feelings knotted together and sat uncomfortably in his chest. He couldn't get his mind to focus on the task at hand. It was hard to breathe. Guilt had swollen up his throat and sat between his clenched teeth. He stared down at a block of tofu in his hand, feeling his eyes burn and his nose prickle. The plastic creaked.

A pile of fabric shoved into his chest, and he surfaced again. Liu Qingge stood before him, frowning. Confused, Luo Binghe gave his shishu a large smile and tilted his head in a questioning manner.

"Change," the war god ordered.

"Right here?" Luo Binghe asked, acting shy. "If Shishu wants-"

"*Binghe!"* Liu Qingge barked. His skin colored a delicious pink. The corner of his lip pulled at his suppressed amusement. "Change. Now. *In the bathroom.*" He slid behind him and shoved him towards the door. "Shameless!"

Catching himself as he fell forward, Luo Binghe threw a playful glance over his shoulder. He almost believed that there was a shining tenderness in the war god's eyes. It soothed some of the bruises around his heart. He stepped into the bathroom and changed, as he was told. When he came back out, he wore a short sleeve shirt and loose pants. He deposited his old clothes among the piles of others and turned to watch his shishu admiringly.

Liu Qingge moved with sharp precision through the kitchen. It wasn't the same sweeping elegance of his shizun, but there was a lethal grace to it. He prepared tea, snatching mugs from the cupboards, sliding his choice of tea leaves onto the counter, and boiling water. He caught sight of Luo Binghe and then did a doubletake. A packet of tea slipped from his fingers, and his eyes widened.

The shirt was standard, from what Luo Binghe had seen, in this world. It wasn't skin-tight or anything like that, though it certainly was more daring than the layers of robes that he was used to. It was *extremely* satisfying to watch Liu Qingge's face freeze and his lips part.

With a grin, Luo Binghe sauntered into the kitchen. He plucked the packet of tea off the floor, and leaned against the counter beside his shishu. Transforming his face into beguiling innocence, he asked, "Is Shishu alright?"

Face coloring, Liu Qingge turned back to the tea. He snatched the packet away from him and glowered down at the counter. “Mn.”

The outfit had certainly flustered the war god. There was very little question on whether or not Liu Qingge was attracted to Luo Binghe. But… also very little chance that he would ever act on it.

Luo Binghe chided his heart once again. He broke his own promise, again, to be more respectful to his shishu. He forced himself to relax, even as his chest prickled with yearning. Setting his head on his hand, Luo Binghe turned his attention to the tea. “What would Liu-shishu like for this Binghe to prepare for him?”

Keeping his eyes averted, Liu Qingge shrugged and grunted. A wordless, *Whatever you want.*

Luo Binghe decided to grant his shishu some mercy and stepped away from him. “Alright! This Binghe will begin!” He descended upon the fully stocked kitchen. At first, things started out smoothly. He plucked items from the fridge and cupboards, and slid cutting boards onto the counter. Then the differences of the two worlds slammed into him. The technology was alien and confusing. Strange material wrapped around some of the produce. And the food *looked* different. Some of it even felt weird! He was anxious about the flavors. Normally he could turn off his brain and sink into the motions. Everything was too odd. Most of his time was spent struggling to *understand.* He even failed to sink into the rhythm of chopping vegetables. Then the stove top. The *fucking* stove top.

It was stupid. Dials. Knobs. Numbers.

Who thought it would be a good idea to cook food like that!?

If Luo Binghe hadn’t dragged them here, he wouldn’t have to be dealing with this right now. If he hadn’t-

He tried to shut down his mind. (He was drowning.) He tried to focus on cooking. (It didn’t work.) The heat of the wok, the cracks of heated oil, and sizzling growls of frying meat. (*It hurts*.) Guilt gnawed at his insides. All of this was his fault. He had let himself fall into his lesser emotions. Time and time again, he failed. He *kept* failing. How many promises had he broken? How many times had he hurt those that he loved? He hurt them. *He hurt-*

A hand pressed against his back and he startled. He glanced over his shoulder and found Liu Qingge there, watching him with knowing eyes. “Stop,” his shishu ordered, quietly.

Luo Binghe turned back to the wok. He breathed out a shaky breath. “Sorry…” His breath caught. Tears fuzzed the edges of his vision.

Jaw setting, Liu Qingge didn’t answer. He stared down at the sizzling food, then took half a step closer. The palm of his hand slid down Luo Binghe’s spine, settling like an anchor against his lower back. “Breathe.”

Swallowing around the clumps of emotions, Luo Binghe nodded. He tried. It came out stuttery and wet. “H-He’s… he’s *dying,”* he choked. It was his fault. It was *his fault.* He

couldn't imagine a world where his shizun didn't exist. He didn't *want* to.

Liu Qingge stepped closer until their bodies were flushed together. He hesitated before he wrapped Luo Binghe up in his arms. He tightened his hold until Luo Binghe could hardly breathe, and he set his chin on his shoulder. "I know," he muttered, and his voice was weak and sad.

"It's my fault." Luo Binghe let go of the wok and covered his face with his hands. "*It's my fault!"*

"No."

"I-I brought us here-"

"No."

"*Shishu-"*

"No."

"I-"

Liu Qingge let go just enough to force Luo Binghe to turn around. His hands tightened dangerously on his shoulders. He met Luo Binghe's gaze, his steely eyes sharp with the quiet promise of tears glinting in the corners. "Listen. No one is at fault for Yuan's health. *No one.* Especially not you. We *will* figure something out. We will. We won't let him die."

A broken sound escaped Luo Binghe. He fell forward, and sank into his shishu's arms. "I-I made him come back," he whispered.

"Mn." Liu Qingge held him closer, smothering him. It was exactly what he needed. "And he saw his sister. He missed her."

"But-"

"*Binghe."* Liu Qingge tightened his hold. It made his ribs creak. "Stop hurting yourself… *please."*

All other arguments fled from Luo Binghe's mind. He was doing that, wasn't he? Hurting himself. His eyes fluttered shut and he buried his face into his shishu. "...I don't… know how."

The sharp snap of sizzling oil reminded Luo Binghe of the wok. He twitched.

Liu Qingge let him go, just enough so that he could step back to the stove and tend to the food. He stayed close, hand pressed solidly against his lower back. After a few moments of silence, his head fell forward and rested against Luo Binghe's shoulder. "Describe what you're doing."

"What?" Luo Binghe asked, startled.

“Do it.”

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Luo Binge did as he was asked. It felt a little silly at first, and he halted over a few words. Liu Qingge took it all seriously and nodded along as if he were a student. He stayed as he was, leaning into Luo Binghe with a hand on his back. Every now and then he would ask a question. Eventually, it was easier just to focus on the weight against him and cooking. The guilt that tangled his heart started to grow quiet.

Not before long, dinner was done and the table was set. They sat around the table with an empty seat. Luo Binghe didn’t look in that direction, and instead poked at his meal. He couldn’t help but criticize it. The seasoning was imbalanced. He wasn’t used to whatever powers heated the oven, so the vegetables were cooked unevenly. The meat was also off, perhaps from whatever way it had been stored. It took everything in his power not to toss it all away. When he glanced up, he saw Liu Qingge’s unveiled expression of bliss as he took a bite.

His shishu did not see the imperfections.

Luo Binghe tried to shut off his bad thoughts, and focused on his meal instead. He ate a few bites, chewing thoughtfully. The silence was letting his mind wander. He decided to focus on something that had been bugging him for a while. Haltingly, he said, “You… protected me.”

Stilling, Liu Qingge glanced up at him. He sensed the seriousness of the conversation and set his chopsticks aside. “Mn.”

“Even though…” Luo Binghe struggled to find the words, and decided the rawest truth of them all was the best. “Even though I’m… a demon.”

“Half demon,” Liu Qingge corrected, and he paused as he thought. “You’re a disciple-”

“Liu-shishu,” Luo Binghe interrupted, already sensing where that line was going. “You *hate* demons.”

Liu Qingge paused with a frown. He crossed his arms and sat back in his seat, considering his answer.

Letting him stew, Luo Binghe turned back towards his food. He wondered if being half demon had saved him in his shishu’s eyes. That thought left a bitter note on his tongue. A stark reminder that no matter what he did, he would always be *not enough.*

“Demons are cruel,” Liu Qingge said, finally. “They cause harm. Hurt those that can’t protect themselves. Shen Qingqiu says it’s a cultural difference.” He made sure to catch Luo Binghe’s eye, staring directly into him. “I don’t hate demons. I hate what they *do.* You are not like that.”

You’re wrong, Luo Binghe thought. His hands shook. He was *exactly* like that. Look at where they were – look at what he had *done.* “And if I was?” he pressed, feeling irritated. “How do you know I am not?” His chopsticks creaked in his grip. Voice wavering, he choked, “I am, Shishu. I am like that! I-I hurt him. *Again.”*

“Mn,” Liu Qingge nodded. “You regret it.”

“But I-” Luo Binghe cut off when his throat tightened. He dropped his chopsticks. His hands fell into his lap and he glared down at his plate.

“Would you do it again?” His shishu prompted.

“I don’t *want* to,” Luo Binghe answered. He would rather cast himself into the Abyss again than hurt his shizun. But he kept doing it. “What if I make another mistake? What if I misunderstand? What if Xin Mo gets the better of me? What if-”

“Mn…” Liu Qingge nodded. “We’ll work together then.”

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe said, weakly. His eyes watered. It couldn’t be that easy. He was the war god – a scourge to the demonkind. The dreams that Luo Binghe wove, all of them pointed to Liu Qingge *hating* demons.

With a sigh, his shishu nodded. “You need more. Eat. Let me think.”

The two finished their meal in silence. It wasn’t as torturous as it had been before. Every now and then, Liu Qingge’s foot would bump into his. It helped ground him. Once the war god set aside his chopsticks, Luo Binghe snatched the dishes away before he could even think to clean them himself. Then he drifted into the kitchen. His shishu followed, leaning against the kitchen island to watch him.

After Luo Binghe finished and dried his hands on a towel, Liu Qingge finally spoke. “Qi deviation – in the Bamboo House. You provoked me. To hurt you. I was confused. There was the demonic sword, but also your zuiyin. It came out.”

Shock spilled over Luo Binghe, almost as if he had slipped into a bath of cold water. That had happened *days* ago. His shishu had known… since the beginning. He started revisiting every single interaction between the two of them since that moment – Liu Qingge had comforted him, they had *shared a bed.* Twice. And he had known. *Liu Qingge had known.*

Tapping his fingers against the counter, Liu Qingge stared thoughtfully down at his feet. “Then we were here. I thought it was… some demonic curse. But none of it was matching up. It didn’t make sense. Then… the truth. About Yuan. About the Immortal Conference.” He looked up at Luo Binghe. “And I understood.” He said it in a way that his understanding went *deeper* than just that. Like he had stripped away every element that made Luo Binghe who he was, examined each part, and understood why each worked as it did.

Luo Binghe felt vulnerable and unsteady on his feet. No longer could he tuck away and hide the ugly parts of himself. Not underneath the war god’s sharp, dissecting eyes.

“I understand,” Liu Qingge said, and he reached out to set a hand on his shoulder. “It’s alright.”

His shishu saw *all of him*. He wasn’t abhorred by the twisted, grotesque thing that lay underneath all the masks. He *accepted* him.

“Is it hug time?” Liu Qingge asked.

A wet laugh escaped Luo Binghe. He nodded and dragged his feet around the counter, where his shishu caught him and held him close. The hold was tight enough to squeeze the air from his lungs. Warm kindled where their bodies met, sinking into the depths of his bones. There were very few instances in his life where he had ever felt this safe: in his mother’s arms, in his shizun’s arms, and now here.

Greedy, the thought came unbidden.

And that’s alright, he told that thought. It was *okay* to be greedy. It was okay.

The two of them stayed like that for a long while.

It was late but neither of them suggested going to bed. The mere thought of laying down to rest sent Luo Binghe into a mild spiral. He couldn’t bear the thought of being comfortable in that vast, empty bed while his shizun was trapped among strangers. The living area still held the mark of their first night in this world. Makeshift beds littered the floor, and most of the furniture was pushed out of the way. In the clearest spot on the floor, Liu Qingge ran through some exercises. He moved with disciplined grace, face drawn in concentration. It was distracting.

“Shishu?” Luo Binghe called. He sat on the edge of the couch, watching him.

“Mn?” Liu Qingge raised his leg as he balanced on the other, fluid with every single stroke.

“Can this Binghe have the phone?” Luo Binghe asked. “I’ll read the book aloud.”

Curiosity glinted in his shishu’s eyes. He slid the phone out of his pocket, unlocked it, and handed it over to him. Then he went back to practicing his forms.

Luo Binghe navigated back to the website, grateful that the website saved the special characters that allowed them access. (If he recalled correctly, they were the “username” and “password.”) It took a bit to navigate back to the chapter they last left off. As soon as he found it, he settled back against the cushions and began to read aloud. It was odd to see his life presented in such a way. His life had been dressed up for others to consume as entertainment. It was alienating and cold. He refused to believe that his life was *written* by Shang Qinghua, and rather liked to believe that their world had already existed and it was that rat of a man who had just had visions of it.

That was slightly easier to digest.

As he shifted from one form into another, Liu Qingge glowered. “...did he really do that?”

Luo Binghe paused. He had to figure out what he just read – Shen Qingiqu spilling hot tea over him. Sometimes he just read the words aloud, especially the worst parts, without really *reading* them. He had completely checked out after the death of his mother and hadn't even realized how much time had passed. As he gathered his thoughts, he managed to answer, "Yes."

Frustration tightened Liu Qingge's lips. He threw a few jabs into the air, and ducked an imaginary swing. "That was not right."

No. It wasn't, was it? That day seemed so long ago it had been buried underneath the dozens of other times he had shared tea with his *true* shizun. As he thought about it now, he could still remember the horrid shock of that moment and the cold disdain in that man's eye. He had always assumed that he had yet to earn his place, and that one day he might finally prove to his shizun that he belonged. Little did he know, all he had to do was wait for the right person to show up.

Liu Qingge sighed in irritation. "Shen." He said that name in a way that hadn't in a very long time – almost as if it were a curse. His eyes narrowed. "If anyone tries that again, tell me."

An unexpected fountain of warmth bubbled inside his chest. Luo Binghe tore his gaze away from the screen to stare up at his shishu. He was reminded yet again that this man, the War God of Bai Zhan, was willing to defy his entire sect just to keep him safe. His throat tightened with a surge of emotion. He was surprised at how much he cared for Liu Qingge. That admiration might have always been there, confused by his jealousy and singled-focus on his shizun. Now it had grown into something undeniable.

I think I might love you.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe said, setting the phone aside. There was only one real way he knew how to show his gratitude for his shishu. "Would you like to spar?"

"Yes!" Liu Qingge danced on his feet, rolling out his arms.

It was adorable. Luo Binghe bounced up onto his feet. "Let's make more room, then." The two of them worked together to move aside anything that looked breakable and cleared a large portion of the space. He hoped that their spar was nowhere near as destructive as the one in the Bamboo House. There was no An Ding Peak to clean up after them here.

Predictably, Liu Qingge forced Luo Binghe to run through a few drills before they started. He scowled at the idea that Luo Binghe would willingly throw himself into exercise without warming up first.

"Bad stance," Liu Qingge told him, and came up behind him to correct his form. He was very hands on, using his foot to slide Luo Binghe's into the right angle. His hand braced Luo Binghe's lower back, and another caught his shoulder and wrenched it back.

To say that his stern no-nonsense teaching voice did *not* do something for Luo Binghe would be a complete and utter lie.

Still, Luo Binghe did not lean into his shishu like he yearned to. The man might have accepted his feelings, but he still had not returned them.

He took the touches where he could get them, and diligently corrected his stances. When there was a pleasant burn in his muscles, the two of them finally started their first match. Like a good student, Luo Binghe restricted himself to the "proper" forms.

That meant he got his ass kicked.

He was too focused on following his shishu's instructions. Time in the Abyss had taught him how to fight ruthlessly, in a wild sort of way that took the fighting stances he had learned and perverted them in a beastly manner. If he truly cared about winning, he would stop trying to *learn* and would *fight.*

But he liked his shishu correcting his posture, criticizing his kicks and jabs, and (most of all) pinning him to the ground.

If the two were in their world, where they were cultivators and Luo Binghe had his demonic blood, he doubted it would be this easy for his shishu.

Time passed that way, with Liu Qingge excited in that stern way of his to discuss a topic he was an expert on. It was nice. His shishu usually did not speak that much. He spoke more now. "Good," he would praise or he would correct him in one way or another, "Don't lock that knee."

The two of them reset, taking their places on either side of the open floor. Luo Binghe had sweat trailing down his temples, bouncing on the balls of his feet. There was a delicious burn in his muscles that he enjoyed chasing. He would feel this tomorrow.

With a single nod from Liu Qingge, the match started.

They circled around another, testing for weaknesses. Luo Binghe calculated how he would approach this round. Did he want to impress his shishu by showing him up? Did he want to fly in fast and startle him? He ran through a series of moves in the back of his mind, predicting how his shishu would retaliate to each one.

Liu Qingge moved first. He darted in as fast as a winking light. His leg swung up to catch Luo Binghe in the side. He caught his shishu's leg and twisted into the swing to throw him off balance.

Two fists flew at him – one slammed into the center of his chest, but he redirected the other off to the side. It was all his shishu needed to free his leg.

With a wild grin, Luo Binghe threw himself forward and caught Liu Qingge around the waist.

Grunting, Liu Qingge managed to keep his feet underneath him. He slid backwards on the floor. He elbowed Luo Binghe in the side, and fought to dislodge his grip. One of his knees came up to slam into his hip.

Pain sparked. The knot of a bruise was already starting to form. It was worth it.

They crashed to the ground and became a mix of limbs. Liu Qingge's legs wrapped around Luo Binghe and he lurched off the ground. They flipped, with Luo Binghe's back hitting the floor. He used an elbow to shove back Liu Qingge' shoulder, trying to throw him off balance. A hand wrapped around his wrist and pinned it to the floor.

Luo Binghe rolled his hips and shoved off the ground, tensing the muscles in his thighs to give him leverage.

His shishu made a noise.

The tight furrow of Liu Qingge's brows loosened. "Oh."

Another hand caught his other wrist. Luo Binghe's arms were pinned above his head, but he *knew* if he just-

Lips met his.

Luo Binghe stopped fighting. He became a puddle. He didn't own a single piece of his own body except for his lips and that's all he was. Everything in the universe was nothing but the feeling of warm, plush lips pressing against his own.

Breathing wasn't even a question. It wasn't *happening.* Soft, curious kisses pressed against the seam of his mouth, moving rhythmic and slow. Luo Binghe became starkly aware of each point of contact. Hands on his wrists. Legs bracketing his hips. Solid body weight holding him down. Tingles shot down his spin, dancing up and down his limbs. His heart swooned. The tips of his fingers prickled with shock and *feeling.* Liu Qingge was kissing him. His shishu was kissing him. *The war god was kissing him.*

Liu Qingge pulled away, his steel eyes thawed. "Breathe, Binghe."

"Sh-Shishu…?" Luo Binghe asked, voice breaking past his lips. All of this was too much to hope for. Part of his mind kept telling him that it wasn't real. He didn't deserve this. Not after what he had done.

"Binghe." Liu Qingge let go of one of his hands. He reached out towards him, as if he were about to cup Luo Binghe's cheek. Then he turned away and grew flustered. His body tensed, ready to flee.

Luo Binghe didn't let him. He surged forward and fiercely kissed him in return. With his free hand, he caught the back of his shishu's neck to drag him closer. His heart felt so full in his chest he imagined he felt his ribs creak. This was everything he wanted.

(Almost everything.)

Liu Qingge grunted in surprise, and tried to match his enthusiasm. Their teeth clicked together.

All of Luo Binghe's control came crashing down. Hungry, he gnawed on his shishu's lower lip. Even as he became overwhelmed with emotion, he was so careful about every other piece of him. He stopped himself from rocking his hips up. His body *ached.* He wanted to taste every piece of his shishu. He wanted to grind into him until the ache in his groin was sated. He wanted *everything.*

But he didn't push for it.

Instead he sucked and gnawed desperately, trying to savor the feeling of the war god's pretty mouth.

An annoyed grunt escaped Liu Qingge. His hand snatched Luo Binghe's neck and he used it as leverage to shove him back down against the floor.

The back of his head knocked against the carpet. Luo Binghe gasped as sparks ricocheted down his body. That was *hot.* Despite all of his control, he rocked his hips up seeking friction. *Fuck, fuck-*

"Stop biting," Liu Qingge snapped. His hold tightened warningly on his neck.

Fuck.

Luo Binghe could finish as he was – untouched except for a rough hand on his neck. He whined.

"Slow down." Liu Qingge instructed him, as if he were instructing him on fighting stances, and he kissed him. Again. Rhythmic and slow.

It was so unbelievably hot.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe groaned against his lips, "Shishu. Shishu-"

A tongue slid across his lower lip, and he felt like he was on fire. Liu Qingge did not kiss like they were in a fight. He was not stiff. He was masterfully controlled, relentless, and achingly tender. He tasted like their dinner. Somehow the spices were better on his tongue.

"Fuck!" Liu Qingge pulled away with an annoyed grunt. "*Stop. Biting."* His teeth caught onto Luo Binghe's lower lip and he *bit.*

Pain exploded. He tasted blood and it went *right* to his groin. He moaned miserably, fighting to keep still. "M-Ming-gege-"

His shishu's breath hiccuped. A deep, almost primal sound reverberated in Liu Qingge's throat. He growled against his lips and grounded his hips down.

Luo Binghe saw stars.

"Please, please, please, please…" He begged, voice barely anything but gasps. Every piece of his body was weak and molten with need. "Please, *please-"*

His shishu's lips cut off his pleading.

Luo Binghe lost control. He freed his other hand and groped greedily. His hands slid down Liu Qingge's chest, squeezing the thick muscle of his pectorals. Liu Qingge let out a weak, embarrassed sound against his lips. That sound almost made him black out. He wanted to hear more. Both of his hands scoured the tight muscle of Liu Qingge's abdomen. He caught the lip of his shirt and dove under it. Liu Qingge's skin was scalding. Sweaty and smooth. His fingertips traced back to the dip of his shishu's lower back, digging into the tight muscle.

Liu Qingge broke away and breathed heavily against his mouth. "Binghe." His voice was husky and low.

"Shishu, Shishu, Shishu," Luo Binghe said. He followed the line of Liu Qingge's spine up, hitching up his clothes as he went. "Yes. Yes. *Yes!"*

With a humored smile, Liu Qingge said, "Haven't asked yet." His expression was hazy with lust, though hesitant and shy. "Binghe."

"Shishu," Luo Binghe whined. "Please. Please. *Please*-"

Another kiss swallowed the rest of his pleading. With a half annoyed and half amused smirk, Liu Qingge squeezed his throat. "*Quiet.* Stop." He sat up.

Luo Binghe frowned. The distance between them was too far. He strained and chased after his shishu, pressing starving kisses against his skin.

"Wait," Liu Qingge mumbled in between the kisses. "Hold. On." He grunted, and pressed his thumb against the split skin of Luo Binghe's mouth. "Binghe! *Wait."*

With a pitiful sound, Luo Binghe stopped. He pouted.

Liu Qingge's eyes narrowed on the shape of his lips, eyes dark and hungry. He nodded to himself. Then his eyes shut, looking pained. "We… should talk." He cringed at the idea. "Because… you're an idiot."

"Hey," Luo Binghe protested. It was supposed to sound pouty but he was too amused and aroused. "What… does Shishu want to talk about?"

"...you…" Liu Qingge flustered, still refusing to open his eyes.

As the war god struggled to catch the words, Luo Binghe used the time to pull himself back into some semblance of control. He rose up onto his elbows. His eyes scoured his shishu's expression, and he tried to figure out *what* his shishu thought was important enough to say *now.* His heart stuttered – but it was too much to hope for. Kissing was one thing. Sex (as exciting as it was) was another. That didn't mean that the war god was *in love* with him. That didn't mean that any of this *meant* anything.

In some ways, Luo Binghe could read his shishu so well. He understood the way his shishu's mind worked, even including the leaps in logic. But when it came to his shishu's feelings? He

was extremely hard to read. Maybe it was because Liu Qingge didn't even understand himself.

"...if Liu-shishu doesn't want…" Luo Binghe started, uncertain. "We can stop."

"No!" Liu Qingge's eyes snapped open. His expression twisted, embarrassed and pained. "I-" His lips pulled into a tight line.

"...I want you," Luo Binghe murmured, softly. "This Binghe will take anything that Shishu wants to give."

"...s-shameless," Liu Qingge stuttered. He didn't add anything else.

This conversation was… going nowhere. Luo Binghe grew impatient after a minute and broached, "...*does* Shishu want…?"

"Yes!" Liu Qingge turned his head away, eyebrows knotting together. "Shut up!"

Well. Luo Binghe eased back down on the ground. He set his hands on his shishu's thighs and felt the man twitch. Experimentally, he dragged his palms up and down.

Liu Qingge's lips parted. His blush flushed all the way down his neck, disappearing underneath the collar of his sweatshirt. His clothes were still rustled from Luo Binghe's earlier gropings, exposing a slice of skin above the waistband of his sweatpants. Luo Binghe dug his thumbs into the inner muscle of the war god's thighs, eyes narrowed in on the shape of his arousal.

A soft gasp escaped Liu Qingge, and his head rolled back. "Y-You!"

"Me," Luo Binghe said with a playful smile.

Liu Qingge finally looked him in the eye again. There was a gleam of desperation in his eye, as if he *wanted* Luo Binghe to understand.

The issue was, Luo Binghe *didn't.*

Before he could open his mouth to ask, Liu Qingge leaned down and kissed him. This kiss was more urgent than before, as if it carried the weight of a thousand words. With a shy hand, he directed Luo Binghe by holding onto the side of his face. Every single touch was achingly tender. It ignited a deep, hungry yearning within Luo Binghe. He wanted to understand, but what he *thought* his shishu was saying…

It was too much to hope for.

Chapter End Notes

Summary:

The kisses get heated, and in true LBH fashion, he is very bitey. LQG chastises him for biting, then tries to instruct him on how to kiss. As things get even *more* heated, LQG puts a stop to it and says that they should talk. Except that... LQG struggles immensely with verbalizing his feelings.

After a few minutes of struggling with his words, LQG decides to try and just kiss LBH to show how he is feeling, unfortunately LBH is a little bit at a loss and has no idea what his shishu is trying to say.

He doesn't want to mix up want he *wants* with what is actually happening.

Full clarity: I'm at a crossroads for this fic. It's rated mature. Initially the idea was that there would not be explicit content within, though references to it. I was always going to give full warning, and all sexual content was going to be optional and could be skipped. Along with a summary for any who don't want to miss anything.

As it stands.... CH28 is explicit. I am juggling between pushing the rating up or posting the explicit content as its own one-shot in a series with this fic. I am leaning towards the latter.

All in all, all sexual content will be optional. There will be summaries so individuals who do not want to interact with that don't have to.

...but I am still on the fence of how I am going to do that.

So... keep an eye out! Either way, another chapter will be posted this upcoming Saturday.

If I do decide to post the explicit content, I will still post the next non-explicit chapter so that way those who do not want to engage with that can have a chapter to look forward to.

Thanks everyone!! I really appreciate you <3

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Ah.... 7.3k words or so, which is about a 28 ish minute reading time!

As a full warning, this chapter contains explicit sexual content! If that's not in your interests, you can skip to the summary at the end here.

TLDR of this chapter... two virgins play with swords!

Also, a little warning... there's a lot going on right now for me ha;; my health has taken a downturn, and so I am a little hazy while editing. Please forgive any mistakes!

Content Warning: First Time, Hand Job, Blow Job, Rough-play, Dirty Talk... not quite sure what everyone wants to be warned by.

Binghe's protagonist powers don't make this awful, I suppose?

Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Please.

There was an indescribable heat that coiled in Liu Qingge's center. It pulsed, yawning with hunger. It was empty as much as it was all encompassing, threatening to devour all of him. It was terrifying. It was addictive. His legs bracketed Luo Binghe's hips, and he felt the daunting press of the half-demon's arousal. It made something skitter along his gut. Both from excitement and from trepidation.

Please, understand, Liu Qingge begged with his kiss.

Their tongues entwined and chased another. It was a clumsy, slobbery dance with too much teeth. Every time their lips moved, he felt the swollen knot on the brat's lip from the bite. Liu Qingge was embarrassed with himself for that lapse of control – he had long since thought he had outgrown the need to *bite* things. As a child when he got overwhelmed, he would just find something to clamp his teeth around. The edges of his robes were most often the victim of his chewing. But he was an adult now…

He…

Where was his control?

I want you. I want you. I want you.

The words sat like a leaden weight on his tongue. He desperately wanted Luo Binghe to *understand.* Couldn't the half-demon feel the way his heart threatened to pound its way up his throat and out his mouth?

Please…

Action was always easier for him. It was always clearer. If Luo Binghe couldn't feel the turmoil in his chest, it was because they weren't *close enough.*

Liu Qingge fell further onto the man underneath him, desperate to make him understand and *feel.* His legs splayed in an embarrassing manner, muscles straining. What he hadn't expected was the shocking burst of pleasure that ricocheted through his body as his cock pressed down and rubbed against Luo Binghe. A surprised sound erupted from the base of his throat.

That was a moan. He just *moaned.*

He was almost too desperate to be mortified.

"S-Shishu!" Luo Binghe broke their kiss to cry out. His hands clamped down tight, fingers digging into the meat of his thighs. He lost control, head rolling back against the carpet as his hips ground up.

Liu Qingge made a sound he never expected to leave his lips. It was a soft, delicate catch in his throat. Pleasure shot through him, weakening his muscles. He couldn't speak as it raced up his spine and caught his throat. The only noise he could make was humiliating, unbidden sounds.

I need you. Please, understand. I need you.

There was a lot that he had never done before. He never had this particular interest: to share fluids with another person. It seemed extraneous and a waste of time. He had kissed a few others here and there, none of which were entirely inspiring. Nothing like kissing Luo Binghe.

The man was overeager. It would be annoying… if it wasn't Luo Binghe. It was strange, because it was definitely *doing* something for Liu Qingge. Not that he would admit that aloud.

To smother any more embarrassing sounds, Liu Qingge kissed Luo Binghe, again. He tried to drag it out, using his tongue and lips to translate the tangled mess of a brain.

How could he put it into words?

There was something blossoming inside his chest. Something dangerous and terrifying. It might not be *love,* but it was almost there. It would get there, one day.

I want to fight with you.

I want to keep you safe.

I want to hear your laugh, unbidden and free.

I want to see you smile when it's real.

I want to walk into the future with you and Yuan at my side.

How did he explain any of that? What words could *encompass* all that he felt?

You're ours.

You belong to us.

You're everything.

Their kissing devolved as Luo Binghe grew more eager. He chewed at Liu Qingge's lips like he wanted to tenderize meat. It annoyed Liu Qingge enough to knock him out of the inescapable spiral of his feelings. He caught the half-demon's throat with his hand and shoved him back down against the ground. "Stop *biting!"*

Luo Binghe whined through his teeth, beautifully flushed. He was wrecked with his lips swollen and abused. The bite had left a bright red mark, like a beacon. His dark lashes fluttered over his darkened eyes, which glittered with needy tears. "Shishu," he pleaded, groaning. His hips thrust upwards, seeking friction.

A surprised noise escaped Liu Qingge, and his hold loosened. All of his joints turned loose and gooey, pleasure leaking into every single corner of his body. He surprised himself by meeting the half-demon, grinding back down into him. It was explosive. His eyes fell shut, and his mouth hung open. He had never felt *anything* like this before.

Liu Qingge had never *wanted* this before — no. That was a lie. He had *told* himself he never wanted it.

There were countless times he felt that throbbing, aching need.

It showed up in the stupidest ways — when Shen Yuan looked up at him with the slightest curve of his lips. When his graceful, long fingers held back his sleeve as his brush glided across paper. When he stared into Liu Qingge's eyes with his bare wrist held delicately in the palm of Liu Qingge's hand.

Qingge, the man would say. *Qingge.* As if they were so familiar. As if his name *belonged* to Shen Yuan, and it was by mere whim that he graced Liu Qingge the privilege of borrowing it.

And now…

Liu Qingge hadn't realized he was touching Luo Binghe until his fingers touched the scorching heat of skin.

Their workout plastered some of Luo Binghe's curls to his face, and sweat glittered on his skin. He arched into Liu Qingge's touch, almost as if it might bring him to ascension.

He was so beautiful.

That damned shirt had been teasing Liu Qingge the moment the brat had stepped out of the bathroom. It clung favorably to his pecs, teasing the shape of his nipples. The length of his sleeves bared thick biceps and strong, tantalizing forearms.

Liu Qingge dug his fingers underneath the hem and pushed that damned shirt up until it reached Luo Binghe's throat. He feasted on the sight before him: thick muscle, pebbled nipples, and a trail of dark hair that guided down underneath the hem of his loose pants.

Beautiful.

"Sh-Shishu," Luo Binghe panted.

Shame flushed through Liu Qingge. He hadn't even *asked,* had he? He sat up, shifting his weight to make sure nothing *rubbed.* It would loosen the bare grasp he had on his control. What was he *doing?*

He hadn't planned for any of this. It wasn't until he had sat atop Luo Binghe earlier, feeling the half-demon squirm underneath him, when he realized how much he *wanted* him. Then he just… kissed him. He didn't know what the next steps would be. He was stumbling forward, blind in foreign terrain.

"Shishu?"

"...do you… understand now?" Liu Qingge asked, cringing.

By the stark confusion in Luo Binghe's eyes, he didn't. "Shishu should show me," he murmured, fluttering his lashes in an alluring way.

The man was flirting with him. Liu Qingge didn't *understand* how Luo Binghe could be thrown into any situation and handle it so gracefully. He needed rules, a clear set of steps, to *understand.* If not, he would fumble around like an idiot or flee. "How… how about Yuan? You said…" He pressed his lips into a thin line, too thin-faced to repeat Luo Binghe's bold claim about saving himself.

Luo Binghe's dark eyes softened. He ran his hands up and down Liu Qingge's sides. The movement might have been some sort of consoling effort. It only had the effect of stoking the fire in Liu Qingge's core. "Shishu," Luo Binghe murmured, "you *are* a special someone to this Binghe."

How could the brat say such embarrassing things so easily!?

"B-But Yuan," Liu Qingge insisted. That man was there for him first.

"Ming-gege," Luo Binghe said, amused. "Do you not believe me? I'll say it. I care about you. A lot. I want to give everything to you." His hands rested on Liu Qingge's hips, his thumbs

rubbing circles on either side. "*Firsts* don't matter, because it's the future that we have together that matters most to me."

Fucking silver tongue, golden words. Liu Qingge did not know how the brat could be so brazen with his words. His stomach flipped with his anxiety, but he nodded and said, "Mn."

Luo Binghe froze. His eyes widened. "Y-Yes?" His voice pitched. "Y-Y-You- Shishu, you– *yes?"*

Yes! That's what he had been trying to say! Liu Qingge leaned down, taking Luo Binghe's cheek in a gentle caress. He kissed him. "Mn."

"Shishu," Luo Binghe said, voice shaking. Tears filled his eyes, spilling over his cheeks. "Shishu, really?"

Yes! Yes! "Shut up," Liu Qingge murmured, and he kissed him again. *You're ours. Ours. All ours.*

He realized as he kissed Luo Binghe that neither had questioned if Shen Yuan was a part of this. They both knew how the other felt about the man. He was an inevitable piece to their puzzle, as soon as they got a chance to *show* him.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe said against his lips, his voice breaking with a sob, "Shishu. Shishu."

With the corner of his lip curled, Liu Qingge pulled back. He held Luo Binghe's face in his hands, wiping away tears with his thumbs. "Binghe."

"P-Please excuse this one," Luo Binghe whispered, his throat catching. He trembled as he fought back his tears. "I-I just…" His eyes squeezed shut and he threw himself forward with a surprising amount of strength. His arms latched around Liu Qingge, tugging him close.

Now Liu Qingge sat on the brat's lap. It was… an odd position that he wasn't necessarily against. The most embarrassing part of it was the stark way their arousal pressed and rubbed between their bodies. He forced himself to ignore that part, and instead ran comforting hands down Luo Binghe's back.

Yes, you're ours. I care about you, my Binghe. You've taken my heart. Care for it, will you?

"Shishu," Luo Binghe murmured against his throat. "Can… this Binghe… touch you?"

Flustered by the bold question, Liu Qingge could only nod.

He hadn't realized he opened a floodgate.

Suddenly he was on his back, his legs wrapped around Luo Binghe's hips, with hands sliding around his body. Luo Binghe found the hem of his shirt, and trailed his hands up his chest. The foreign touch caused Liu Qingge's breath to hitch. Sparks flew across his skin. He blinked, surprised, at the ceiling.

Fingertips caught into his nipple. His body jerked. The flicker of feeling was dull and not a bright lure of pleasure. It was *odd.* No one had ever dared touch him like *that* before. The few times he had touched himself, he never thought to play with his chest.

Luo Binghe panted, eyes dark. "Ming-gege, can I take off your clothes?"

Oh. Liu Qingge was nodding before he even really thought about it. He just wanted to be touched *more,* and the clothes seemed like they were getting in the way.

Extracting his hands, Luo Binghe stared down at him. His eyes traveled down his chest, engrossed with how his shishu's clothes had hitched up around his waist. "Ming-gege is so handsome…"

"N-Not 'gege,'" Liu Qingge warned, though it came out embarrassingly weak.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe murmured. "Shishu is so handsome. This Binghe wants to taste him. Will Shishu let him? Will Shishu-"

That dirty talk was *not* going to stand. Liu Qingge growled and lurched up. He caught a fistfull of Luo Binghe's shirt and used it to hold the brat at bay. "Shut. Up. Shirt *off.* Now."

Eyes widening, Luo Binghe nodded. In moments, the shirt was flung across the room. He sat back, using one of his hands to brace against the floor, and looked up at Liu Qingge demurely. "Yes, Shishu. Tell this Binghe what to do." With his other hand, he teased his fingertips up and down his own chest. With a practiced thumb, he flicked his nipple. A shaky breath escaped him, and he tugged his lower lip between his teeth.

A realization settled over Liu Qingge all at once – that Luo Binghe had *definitely* touched himself before. How many times? How often? What did he think about? Probably his shizun. That thought almost made him want to pant like a dog in heat. *Fuck.* Leaning back, still atop Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge gathered both the light sweatshirt and his t-shirt. He tugged them over his head and set them aside.

(He was *not* brazen enough to fling them away as Luo Binghe had.)

"Shishu," Luo Binghe breathed. His eyes devoured the sight. "Oh, *Gege.* You're so handsome. You-"

Fuck him. Fuck his annoying "gege." Liu Qingge pinned him down against the ground again, kissing him fiercely.

Luo Binghe laughed, *the brat*, against his lips. His hips rose to meet Liu Qingge's, and he rut against him.

His annoyance flickered out in favor of the devastating way his body loosened underneath the onslaught. He felt pressure building in his core, and the telltale signs of his scalp prickling. It wasn't enough. Liu Qingge groaned helplessly.

Hands groped down his sides, then slipped underneath the hem of his sweatpants. He jerked in surprise as fingers grasped the bare skin of his backside. Liu Qingge broke the kiss and

moaned. His cock had its own pulse, straining against the confines of his sweatpants.

“Shishu, Shishu…” Luo Binghe murmured against his cheeks. “You make such pretty noises. This Binghe wants to hear all of them. This Binghe wants-”

Yeah, this was unfair. Liu Qingge *needed* that brat to shut up before he did something embarrassing like finish as he was. He snapped a hand around Luo Binghe’s throat and squeezed. He rose up just enough to glower down at the half-demon. “*Brat,”* he snarled. “Shut. Up!” He leaned down and bit his lip – not as hard as he did the first time.

A whine escaped Luo Binghe, and he arched underneath him. “Shishu, yes! Yes!”

That wasn’t shutting up. Liu Qingge squeezed his throat in warning, and trailed kisses down his neck. He bit down *hard* at his pulse point*,* and Luo Binghe cried out underneath him. He soothed the bite with a kiss, wrapping his lips around the fresh bruise. Then he sucked. Luo Binghe tasted like salt. Pleased tingles danced down Liu Qingge’s spine.

The brat squirmed underneath him, gasping and whimpering, “Shishu! Shishu, yes! Yes! That feels so good-”

Liu Qingge let go of his throat to clamp his hand around his mouth. He angrily started making a trail of marks down Luo Binghe’s neck, and then his chest. He bit down on the meat of Luo Binghe’s pectoral, and feeling Luo Binghe’s hot breath against the palm of his hand as he cried out.

Luo Binghe’s skin was his canvas, blossoming with *his* marks. It was satisfying, and so wholly possessive. He couldn’t stop.

When he got to Luo Binghe’s nipple, he considered it for a moment before experimentally drawing his tongue over it.

The brat’s reaction was instantaneous. If Liu Qingge had thought him loud *before,* now he was almost *screaming*. Luo Binghe arched into him, begging muffled, “Yes! Yes! Please, please, Shishu! There! Touch me there!”

There was no way in hell Liu Qingge was going to last during this endeavor. He decided it was worse having Luo Binghe’s plush lips tease the palm of his hand, so he decided to touch the brat instead. While his mouth coaxed one nipple, his fingers traced and teased the other.

“Y-Yes! Yes, Shishu! Ah, S-Shishu’s mouth is so good! Shishu is so good to this Binghe!”

…who the *fuck* taught Luo Binghe to speak like that!?

It certainly wasn’t Shen Yuan, *that* was for fucking sure!

Liu Qingge pulled away, only somewhat embarrassed by the string of saliva that followed him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and glared down at Luo Binghe. “Shameless.”

“Yes,” Luo Binghe said, a challenging glint in his eyes, “Shameless for Gege.”

Eyebrow twitching, Liu Qingge glowered. He shuffled, moving so that he sat between Luo Binghe's legs. He stared down at the tent in Luo Binghe's loose pants.

"I-Is…" Luo Binghe gulped, showing a trace of shyness. "Should… this Binghe…"

If Luo Binghe *liked* using his mouth so much, he shouldn't have an issue telling Liu Qingge what he needed. Liu Qingge looked him in the eye and scraped his nails along the hem of his pants.

Luo Binghe's voice dissolved into a sharp gasp. His hips stuttered.

"What?" Liu Qingge goaded. He teased the lip of his pants, sliding his fingers underneath them.

"A-Ah…" Luo Binghe gulped. "Should… this Binghe remove his-"

Liu Qingge's thumb brushed against something hard and heavy.

A surprised gasp interrupted the half-demon and he whined miserably, "Please, Shishu! Please!"

"Please what?" Liu Qingge asked, raising an eyebrow. He stretched the lip of Luo Binghe's pants.

"Please, i-if this Binghe c-can be so bold," the half-demon panted, "touch me."

"I am," Liu Qingge told him, feeling mischievous. He let go of the hem of his pants to place his hands on either side of Luo Binghe's hips. He used his fingers to frame the man's erection, and he was startled by the sheer *size* of it.

With a miserable whine, Luo Binghe pleaded, "S-Shishu, please! I want your hand… y-your hand on my cock! Please!"

The vulgar, *needy* words sent a shockwave through Liu Qingge. He groaned and lost control, one of his hands snapping to palm himself through his pants. His head hung as he gasped, body shuddering with both pleasure and the aching need for *release.*

"O-Oh," Luo Binghe said, eyes wide as he watched.

Fuck, fuck! Liu Qingge rutted into the palm of his hand, gasping. Tingles shot down his limbs, prickling the tips of his fingers. He squeezed his eyes shut, too embarrassed by the worship on Luo Binghe's face as he watched him.

He forced his hand to still, clenching his jaw tight.

His breath was stuttery and weak. Swallowing, Liu Qingge dared to open his eyes.

Luo Binghe was touching himself. One of his hands groped at his chest, finger and thumb teasing his nipple. The other hand had slipped into his pants.

“B-Binghe,” Liu Qingge groaned. He was startled by his own lack of control.

“Sh-Sh-Shishu, this-” Luo Binghe whined. “This Binghe wants to feel you. P-Please, please. He wants your hand on his cock. He’ll do anything! Please! Gege, Gege-”

“Shut. Up!” Liu Qingge snapped. “Pants.”

As obedient as ever, Luo Binghe hitched up his hips and threw his pants off in an instant. There was no hesitation. He was naked, just like that, cock furiously red against his thigh.

It was huge. Liu Qingge was surprised when his mouth watered. He had seen body parts before. There were public baths, the occasional bath in a river, or simply the needs of extreme injuries while on the road. None were as beautiful as this. A dark patch of hair curled at the base, with a trail leading back up to Luo Binghe’s navel. The head was a dark, blushing shade of red.

One of Luo Binghe’s hands glided down his abdomen, and he teased his fingertips across his skin. He was sculpted, thick with muscle. The defined lines of his thighs framed his cock beautifully.

Liu Qingge looked up.

There was a coy smile on Luo Binghe’s lips. He watched Liu Qingge without a single ounce of shyness. He knew the allure of his own body.

It was annoying.

It was really turning him on.

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe said, voice quiet and questioning. He acted demure, lowering his eyes. But his hand teased down to wrap around the base of his cock. He dragged his hand up his length, teasing the head with his thumb. His teeth caught onto his swollen lower lip. “Here. This Binghe wants you to touch him *here.”*

Liu Qingge reached down before could start to overthink. His hand wrapped around Luo Binghe. Heat scorched his palm. He felt veins underneath the pads of his fingers, along with the pounding tremor of Luo Binghe’s heartbeat. It was odd feeling another man’s cock in the palm of his hand. Experimentally, he slid his hand up.

“O-Oh, S-Shishu,” Luo Binghe groaned as he let go of himself. He collapsed against the ground, chest heaving. “S-Shishu, yes. Yes!”

Eyebrows pressing together in concentration, Liu Qingge tightened his grip. As he drew closer to the head, he copied Luo Binghe’s previous motion and rubbed his thumb against the slit. It was wet with pearls of precum. He had an insatiable desire to lean down and taste it.

Luo Binghe cried out and thrust into his grip. “Shishu! Shishu, that feels so good. Shishu. Your hand is so good! So tight!”

There was *no way* Liu Qingge could continue this with *that.* He wondered if there was anything that made Luo Binghe insecure. Not confessing his feelings. Not taking off his clothes. Not even shouting to the heavens about… th-this!

Liu Qingge felt a sudden urge to shut him the fuck up. Tightening his grip, he twisted and pumped his hand faster. He leaned down to catch Luo Binghe's cry in his mouth. He was a little more confident with kissing than he was with jacking someone off. His tongue traced along the roof of Luo Binghe's mouth. Their tongues wound together. Through their kiss, Luo Binghe moaned helplessly and rutted up into his hand. His breath was hot and heavy, and he whined into the kisses like a desperate dog.

Fuck.

It shouldn't be that hot.

It was.

Liu Qingge had no experience to account for when it came to this. Hell, he hadn't even touched *himself* that often. More so when he was a teen and had less self-control. He had no technique and it was awkward. But *fuck* if Luo Binghe didn't make him feel like a god. When he first realized how turned on he was during their spar, he hadn't planned for any of this. Each step was just the next one to take, and he didn't know where they would end up.

Right now his dick had its own hopes.

Except… there was only one problem.

Liu Qingge couldn't imagine his grip felt *that* great when it was mostly friction. He frowned, considering if his spit would be enough. Then he recalled that *extremely* embarrassing presentation by Mu Qingfang, who quizzed them on possible lubricants for *safe* sex practice.

"Shishu…?" Luo Binghe asked, panting.

"...need," Liu Qingge said, nodding down towards his hand. He was mortified by what he was about to say. "Need… something to help."

Luo Binghe blinked at him, the haze of his libido lessening as he regained some of his senses. He propped himself up. "Like… lubricant?"

"Yes," Liu Qingge said, cringing. He wondered if Shen Yuan touched himself and if he kept anything around to help with that. The thought made his skin burn. It felt disrespectful to think such things about his shixiong.

"This Binghe…" Luo Binghe started, then he smiled shyly. "This Binghe… got some."

With a frown, Liu Qingge shook his head. He wondered if the half-demon was referencing the cooking oils in the kitchen. "Mu Qingfang said-"

"Yes," Luo Binghe said, wiggling out from underneath him. It was… strangely erotic to see him move, his cock swinging against his thigh. "This Binghe added a few things to the

order… though most won't be here for a few days."

Liu Qingge was distracted when Luo Binghe rolled onto his knees, ass turned his way, before he stood.

It took him far too long to process what the two of them were even talking about. He was too pinpointed on the plush, roundness of his ass and the way it jiggled as he stood. It wasn't until the brat crouched beside a disused cabinet and reached into a hiding spot that it all clicked together.

"You *prepared* for this?" Liu Qingge asked, astounded. This hadn't even been a *possibility* to him. Granted… the three of them had talked about dual cultivation in the other world, but… that was the *other* world.

Luo Binghe's head dropped. He took something out of the hiding spot. Once the item was secured, he turned towards Liu Qingge and dropped into a low bow. "Asking for forgiveness! This lowly one… wasn't planning for anything! H-He… he just… *hoped."*

"Binghe," Liu Qingge chided with a small smile. "Come here."

It… should not be sexy to have a man crawling towards him. Maybe the fact that it was *Luo Binghe* crawling towards him was what made it so unbearably erotic. The brat stopped in front of him, kneeling with his head bowed.

"Binghe," Liu Qingge said. He wasn't brave enough for the words, so he reached out and lifted his head. Then he pulled him close to kiss him.

A soft, pleased sound left Luo Binghe. He crawled forward, and the two of them sank back onto the ground. It did not take long for their kisses to grow in fervor. Especially with Luo Binghe being *completely naked* and his erection stubbornly dragging across Liu Qingge's thigh.

Liu Qingge couldn't decide if he wanted to feel it *inside* of him, or if he wanted to be inside Luo Binghe. Each idea made his knees weaken with anticipation. Either way, going that far tonight seemed like it might be too much all at once.

They broke apart and breathed heavily against another's mouths. Liu Qingge guided Luo Binghe onto his back, and pushed his thighs apart to kneel between them once more. More precum glistened at the top of his cock, and some stains marked the front of Liu Qingge's sweatpants. It was an arousing tableau of their passion.

"Binghe," Liu Qingge asked, holding out a hand.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe answered with a softened smile. He passed a small bottle into Liu Qingge's hand. It had been warmed by his tight grip. "It's really hot seeing you like this, between my legs. Shishu, one day I want to feel you inside me-"

"Shut." Liu Qingge met his eyes with a fierce look. "*Up."*

Luo Binghe grinned wickedly. "This Binghe also wants to watch Gege ride his cock-"

“*B-Binghe!”* Annoyed, he uncapped the bottle and poured it directly over the brat’s erection.

A startled gasp left Luo Binghe’s lips, and his legs jerked. He rolled his head back and whined, “Gege is so cruel! That was cold!”

Liu Qingge doubted it was *that* cold. After capping the bottle once more, he set it aside and spread the oil-like substance all over his cock.

“Ah! Ah, that feels good, Shishu! Yes, please!”

Not again. Liu Qingge tightened his grip and started dragging his hand up and down.

“Shishu! Shishu! Yes, yes! Your hand is so good! Th-This Binghe- ah! He thought… he thought about your strong hands so much! Your long fingers… the callouses on your h-ha-ah!”

Liu Qingge kissed him to swallow the rest of his filthy words, too flustered and aroused to truly reprimand him.

By the sharp, wanton sounds, the lubricant *was* a good choice. Luo Binghe began to thrust into his hand, whining against his mouth. Liu Qingge’s free hand braced against the ground, and he started to trail kisses down the half-demon’s throat. It unfortunately freed his mouth.

“Yes, yes! Shishu is so good. Shishu feels so good. His grip is so tight — ah!”

Liu Qingge bit down on his neck. He wasn’t doing a good job if Luo Binghe could still *talk.* Ruthlessly, he sucked the bite. He tasted sweat on his tongue, and he was surprised at how much he enjoyed it.

“Shishu, please! Shishu-“

Liu Qingge bit him again on the meat of his pectoral. The half-demon writhed underneath him, crying out. His hips rocked into Liu Qingge’s hand. After this he wouldn’t be able to hear “shishu” without thinking of Luo Binghe coming apart underneath him. Damn it. He nipped and kissed scalding skin until he made it to his goal. Then he bit. He knew nipples could be sensitive, so he didn’t bite hard.

“Ah, *ah!”* Luo Binghe screamed. “This-“ his voice cut off with another moan. “This Binghe won’t last much longer, Shishu is so good. Ah! This one has thought so much of Shishu, and his hands, and-“

“Show me,” Liu Qingge ordered, “how Binghe likes to be touched.” He was so fucking aroused and humiliated by the praise. *Shut up, shut up-*

He was horrified that he might finish before he even had a chance to really touch himself.

Luo Binghe panted. “Yes, Shishu, tell this one what to do. He is yours. He is-“

He was not doing what Liu Qingge asked. He bit down on his nipple, sucking harshly, and scraped a nail up his length.

With another shout, Luo Binghe rutted into his palm. His muscles tensed, his breath hitched, and he came.

Liu Qingge knew he was an accomplished man — he was a peak lord, afterall! But at that moment, everything he had ever done was *nothing* compared to this: making Luo Binghe come. A beautiful flush covered Luo Binghe, rising from his chest and flowering along his cheekbones. He had bitten his lower lip, arms thrown above his head as he clutched onto the carpet. His hips rolled, chasing the orgasm, using Liu Qingge as nothing more than a tool. His face twisted up with his ecstasy, completely unbidden. Each breath was short and high pitched, a beautiful symphony. As he grew sensitive, he finally collapsed back onto the floor and sighed out blissfully. Tears clung to his dark eyelashes as he lay there, trying to catch his breath.

He was so beautiful.

Eyes softening, Liu Qingge pressed a gentle kiss to his throat. He started a tender line back up to Luo Binghe's mouth, where his kisses were returned with adoring and fatigued fervor.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe murmured. "Shishu, you made this Binghe feel so good."

Liu Qingge sighed. "Do you *ever* shut the fuck up?"

Laughter bubbled out of Luo Binghe. He met his eyes, grinning.

It took Liu Qingge's breath away. It hit him right *then* how much he truly adored this man. His heart swelled inside his chest, and so much feeling ballooned inside of his lungs he almost couldn't breathe. Shaking his head, he kissed the corners of that grin. "Brat."

"...your brat," Luo Binghe said, hesitantly.

"Mn," Liu Qingge nodded. He had a hard time meeting Luo Binghe in the eye. His throat tightened, but he managed to say, "Our Binghe."

"Shishu…" The half-demon's voice warbled as tears filled his eyes. "This one is so happy…"

"Now…" Liu Qingge said, wryly, "we just have to convince Yuan."

"Shizun cares for Shishu very much," Luo Binghe said. "We just need to help him see that."

Did the man care for him? As much as Luo Binghe said? Liu Qingge's heart fluttered at the idea. He knew that Shen Yuan cared for Luo Binghe more than anything – he had seen the way the man was ready to sacrifice himself for his disciple without question. But for Liu Qingge himself…? He would have to trust Luo Binghe on that.

As he sank into his thoughts, Liu Qingge sat back on his heels. He looked down at his hand, coated with both lubricant and the results of Luo Binghe's orgasm. He rubbed it between his fingers, wondering if he should go clean himself off.

Then Luo Binghe caught his wrist. He brought his hand to his mouth and drew his tongue over his palm. He dragged his tongue up to his fingers, licking between them.

Liu Qingge stopped breathing.

Heat scorched down from his fingertips, down his arm, and sank right into his core. He was entranced. Luo Binghe wrapped his lips around Liu Qingge's fingers and *sucked.* The slurping sounds were loud and depraved. The little brat did not break eye contact. His tongue wove around his fingers, cleaning every last bit of lubricant and come off his skin. He pulled off of the fingers with a *pop.*

Liu Qingge tried to speak. Nothing came out of his mouth. It was obscene how his mind had turned into complete and utter mush, and all he could think about was the constant, throbbing ache of his own cock. It was worse than an aphrodisiac.

"Shishu." The half-demon surged forward. Their lips smashed together, and he caught the back of Liu Qingge's neck to deepen the kiss. He was still as desperate as before, clinging and touching and pulling.

An orgasm apparently wasn't enough to sate him.

He tasted like his own come. It was a musky and bitter taste that Liu Qingge wanted more of, and he was surprised to find himself eagerly leaning in and rolling his tongue to catch more of it.

Luo Binghe pulled back with a loud gasp. "Shishu, Shishu please. Let this Binghe taste you. He wants to suck your cock. He wants you to use his mouth, and finish inside of-"

With an annoyed grunt, Liu Qingge caught the other man by the throat, again, and shoved him back. He glared down at Luo Binghe, at the mess of his orgasm all over his stomach. "No. We'll clean you, first."

"Shishu," Luo Binghe whined. "This one wants to be covered with you too…"

"S-Shameless!" Liu Qingge was aghast, both embarrassed by the audacious proclamation *and* incredibly turned on.

What the hell.

He leaped onto his feet and threw out a warning finger. "Do not move." To emphasize his point, he shoved Luo Binghe back down to the ground with the heel of his foot.

The brat moaned.

Ridiculous.

(Incredibly hot.)

Liu Qingge stormed off to the bathroom to buy himself some dignity and time to calm down. After he briskly washed his hands, he plucked out a small rag and ran warm water over it.

Then he splashed cool water over his face. Leaning against the counter, he glanced up at himself in the mirror.

His skin was permanently stained bright red. His hair was a mess. His lips were swollen. Somehow he looked more debauched than Luo Binghe, and he was the one who hadn't been touched yet.

Yet. Was he really…?

Stomach tightening, Liu Qingge bounced on his feet with his nerves. No one had ever touched him - *there*. Not on purpose, at least. He squeezed out the excess water and padded his way back to Luo Binghe, nerves frying up his body with every step.

Luo Binghe still lay on the ground, wretchedly libidinous and beautiful. He hadn't moved. His flushed cock lay against his thigh. The marks of Liu Qingge's passion were painted all over his chest. He lay there, exposed, with nothing but the signs of his sinful activities to cover him.

How could he be so confident? Luo Binghe didn't seem to worry at all that he might do something wrong or mess up. There were no *rules* for this. Yet he acted as if he had written the fucking manual.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe cooed. His voice had softened. He twitched as if he wanted to move, yet forced himself to stay still.

There must have been something about Liu Qingge's expression. He dropped back down beside the naked man, and meticulously started to clean him.

Luo Binghe watched him unabashedly with a tender expression. The shadow of a smile tugged on the edges of his bruised lips. With a gentle hand, he caught Liu Qingge's wrist once he was done and guided him back down for a kiss.

The two melted into a tangle on the ground. Liu Qingge's body instantly woke up again, and he felt such a ruthless *need* that it strangled him. Hands trailed up his bare sides, and soothed down his back. Each touch left him wanting more, *needing* more.

"Shishu," Luo Binghe whispered against his lips. "Shishu, can this Binghe…?" His hand traveled down the center of Liu Qingge's chest.

His throat tightened with his anxiety. He nodded once before he could think any better of it.

Then he was flipped onto his back. Luo Binghe drew down his body, and pushed apart his thighs.

Oh. He meant… *that.*

Liu Qingge tried to breathe, but his stomach had decided to chase his heart up his throat and his lungs were in the way. He stared up at the ceiling, *willing* himself not to come by just some fucking kisses.

“Shishu. Can this Binghe take off your pants…?” Fingers played along the lip of his sweatpants, fingernails scraped across his skin.

“Mn,” Liu Qingge made a noise of assent, praying to any god that the other man wouldn’t ask for more because he was certainly not getting more than *that.*

The fabric of his sweatpants started to move, and he breathed in a sharp gasp. He felt his pants and underclothes slide down his thighs. Cool air met his dick. His eyes squeezed shut. He fought the urge to clamp his knees together – though that would have been impossible, with Luo Binghe between his legs.

For once, Luo Binghe didn’t say a word. There was a long while where he didn’t do anything, just breathed. Then the palm of his hand pressed against Liu Qingge’s stomach. It startled him. With a soft, soothing noise, Luo Binghe pressed a kiss to his hip bone. His curls fell forward and dragged against Liu Qingge’s bare skin. He followed the line of his hip with kisses and teasing nibbles. Then a wave of hot breath washed over Liu Qingge’s cock.

A small noise broke from Liu Qingge. He slapped a hand over his mouth, shocked, and threw his head to the side.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

With a pleased hum, Luo Binghe kissed the base of his erection.

Liu Qingge’s legs snapped together, tightening around Luo Binghe’s shoulders. His breath hitched and he squirmed.

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe murmured, his breath teasing over his skin. He dug his fingers into Liu Qingge’s thighs, pulling his sweatpants down his legs. “You’re so beautiful.” Once his sweatpants and undergarments hung around his ankles, Luo Binghe lifted his legs over his shoulders. He eased down onto the ground. “You smell so *good…”*

“S-Shut-” Liu Qingge pleaded.

Wet heat left a scorching trail up the length of his cock. His words broke into a loud, startled moan. Luo Binghe was *licking* him. The sensation was strange and wonderful and-

Liu Qingge started desperately thinking about anything but what was going on. He thought about swordforms. He thought about the last beast he had run into – that had been the sowers. It was annoying to track them down, and even more annoying to capture them without getting infected.

Also annoying that a *supposedly dead* disciple had managed to-

A calloused hand wrapped around the base of his cock. Liu Qingge let out another sound and his hips bucked. He slammed his head back into the carpet, jaw tight, as he breathed in through his nose.

He suddenly understood how Luo Binghe became such a noisy mess.

Then the flat of a tongue traced a vein on his length, all the way up to the head. There the tip of that tongue slid along his slit.

Pleasure seized him. Liu Qingge cried out, surprised. He had never felt *anything* like this before. One hand scrambled for purchase, fingers knotting in thick curls. The other stayed clamped around his mouth, trying to hold back any more wanton sounds. He wasn't a whore! Why was he making such noises?! He should have more control!

Lips wrapped around the head of his cock. Scorching wet heat surrounded him. It was intoxicatingly good.

Fingers tightened around the base of his erection and it was *unfair*.

Liu Qingge writhed on the floor. His hips stuttered. He ached for release. An arm came around and clamped down on his navel, forcing him to stay still.

Fuck. He was *whimpering* now.

Fighting for some semblance of control, he bit down on his own hand.

Luo Binghe hummed in delight, and swallowed more of his cock. The vibrations ran down his length, tightening coils in his core.

No, oh no. Liu Qingge tried to push him away, breath hitched and desperate. He couldn't use any words right now to warn him. If Luo Binghe kept… using his mouth…!

Instead of listening, the brat grew eager. The hand at the base of his cock started to rub up his length. His tongue swirled around him. Luo Binghe sucked, not taking too much of Liu Qingge in. It was by no means professional, but Liu Qingge had nothing else to base this experience on. Sometimes the sensitive head of his cock would rub against teeth and he *wished* it gave him some reprieve. It didn't.

(At least Luo Binghe didn't fucking bite.)

Liu Qingge didn't sound like himself. His breaths were tight and whiny, sneaking out through his teeth as he clamped harder and harder around his own hand. His grip on Luo Binghe's hair must have been painful, yet the brat only hummed in his own pleased delight.

The only sound in the room was Liu Qingge's smothered moans and wet, depraved sucking noises.

With one last desperate whine, Liu Qingge tried to push Luo Binghe away. *Stop! Stop, I-*

The brat eagerly bobbed his head down, taking more of Liu Qingge in. He hummed.

That was it.

Liu Qingge came.

He saw stars. It crashed through him, tingles chasing all the way up to the top of his skull. He thrashed, groaning through his hand. As the initial crest of his orgasm faded, his muscles and joints turned to jelly. Pleasure sank into every measure of his being, leaving him so thoroughly wrecked and satisfied.

Never before had he ever felt more stupid in his life.

This was why people had sex?

Fuck.

His cock grew sensitive and he hissed. Both of his hands snapped to catch onto curls, and he yanked Luo Binghe off him.

Gratified and humming, Luo Binghe allowed himself to be dragged. There was a gluttonous contentment in the brat's expression when he caught Liu Qingge's eye. It was only then he made a show of *swallowing.*

Fuck.

His lecherous smirk faded. He crawled back up, catching Liu Qingge's cheek in the palm of his hand. "Shishu…" he murmured, right before he kissed him.

Liu Qingge tasted *himself.* It was dirty… and thrilling in a way he hadn't expected. As if a part of him *belonged* to someone else. As if he stained someone else's life. Their kisses were languid and tender. Luo Binghe was getting better. His sharp bites had turned into teasing nibbles. Their kisses tapered off. With a contented sigh, he collapsed on top of Liu Qingge, threading their legs together.

Yes, Liu Qingge thought. He wrapped his arms around Luo Binghe, holding him close. *You have to understand now. You belong to us. You're ours.*

As if somehow reading his thoughts, Luo Binghe found his hand and threaded their fingers together. He nestled his head against Liu Qingge's chest, and closed his eyes.

The two of them stayed like that, entwined. Nothing held them back from holding on.

Chapter End Notes

Summary: LQG desperately wants LBH to understand that he's trying to show how much he cares for him, and struggles immensely by not being able to voice want he is feeling. He cares a lot for LBH to the point where he envisions life in the future with him and SY.

LBH is extremely eager for this development of their relationship, but... is still wary of LQG's boundaries. He continues to press and tease LQG verbally, being excessive with

his praise which embarrassed LQG.

Before things progress, LQG asks LBH is he's sure about this, because LBH was "saving himself" for his "true loves." And LBH ensures LQG that he is very special to him and states, "Firsts don’t matter, because it’s the future that we have together that matters most to me.”

LQG then agrees - "Mn."

This makes LBH finally realize all that LQG was trying to share and say. He (of course) begins to start crying, and is very happy that someone returns his feelings.

Throughout the experience, LQG inwardly continues to refer to LBH as "ours" - always including SY in his heart when he thinks about LBH.

The two of them end up cuddling on the floor... because why not? return to top ↩

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

3.7k which is roughly a 19 minute reading time.

As a warning! Two chapters are posted today, so be aware and don't accidentally miss chapter 28!

Also, as another light warning, my health (as I stated previously) has taken a bit of a downturn, so please excuse any mistakes. That also means... I am not as ahead in chapters as I would like to be. If there's a point I need to take a break to catch up, I'll warn everyone ahead of time.

Thank you so much for all of your support!!

We got through all the heavy heart chapters, and here we get some well deserved fluff!!

Content Warning: References to sexual content, nudity, and discussions of wanting sex.

The room was silent except for deep, contented breaths. Liu Qingge was never one to be idle. The closest he had ever gotten was during meditation or sleep. Right now, however, his brain was delightfully turned off. His body held the same satisfaction it did after a particularly grueling fight. The added weight of someone on top of him was a bonus, despite the fact that he was never one for touch either.

His subconscious had always decided who could touch him and when, and that list of people grew and shrunk depending on factors that Liu Qingge did not know. Right now he was sweaty and uncomfortably sticky. He should be squirming off the floor to go bathe.

His mind did not focus on any of those things. It was silent.

The only thing that mattered was this: Luo Binghe, who hummed with deep contentment and left a trail of kisses on his skin.

Sometimes Liu Qingge would participate. Their kisses were slower now, more exploratory rather than desperate and needy.

Luo Binghe was a quick learner. Though he still had a tendency to nibble.

It was only as Luo Binghe’s bare thigh brushed along a particularly sensitive part of Liu Qingge’s groin that he gained some of his senses; the two of them were laying in the middle of the sitting room without a single thread of clothing. Shame flushed through his body.

Luo Binghe broke from their kisses, hovering over him. He watched Liu Qingge with naked adoration. His face was soft, dark eyes tender, with happiness sinking into every single inch of his expression.

It was a little daunting to matter so much to someone. But Liu Qingge was never one to run away from something a little frightening.

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe murmured. He raised a hesitant hand, as if unsure he had permission.

In a silent answer, Liu Qingge pressed his cheek against Luo Binghe’s palm.

Eyes softening, Luo Binghe began to trail light fingers across his face. He traced his eyebrows, down his cheek, and across his fluttering lashes. “Shishu…” He paused, and swallowed. There was something tying down his tongue.

Either it had to do with *feelings,* which Liu Qingge wasn’t the best about. Or it had to deal with the fact that Shen Yuan was dying. It was a toss-up. He hoped it was about the dying. Even if he had a hard time with the latter, at the very least he had someone to take care of. Once again, he found himself glad that he wasn’t alone. If he didn’t have Luo Binghe to take care of, he would be falling apart. It was easier to work himself through his grief if he was helping someone else.

That’s how he processed the death of his mother.

It would be how he processed anything else.

Luo Binghe must have decided now wasn’t the time to talk about whatever tied his tongue. Instead, he kissed Liu Qingge again and murmured against his lips, “This Binghe will bathe… does Shishu want to join?”

Did he want to join…?

Eyebrows squishing together, Liu Qingge thought about it. “No,” he decided.

The brat’s smile was perfect. But there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

To chase that away, Liu Qingge captured the back of Luo Binghe’s neck and kissed him fiercely. He wanted to vanquish those doubts. It wasn’t that he regretted anything that had happened in the last thirty minutes. Showering would simply be too much right now. He needed some time to digest his own feelings. And he had a feeling if he showered with Luo Binghe, the two of them might get too distracted.

Luo Binghe smiled into the kiss and relaxed. “Alright,” he murmured. He seemed to understand. It was a fucking *relief* that Liu Qingge didn’t have to verbalize any of that. With a few more kisses, Luo Binghe withdrew and rolled up onto his feet. He stood, unashamed in his full naked glory. He was beautiful; from the curve of his calf, to the sharp line of his hip bone, to the smile that decorated his lips. Even if this specific smile was smug.

The brat.

With a wave of embarrassment, Liu Qingge realized he was leering at him rather openly. “Go shower,” he snapped.

“Yes, Shishu,” Luo Binghe said, voice rumbly and low. He left for the bathroom, throwing one last look over his shoulder before he stepped inside.

Liu Qingge put back on his clothes, and went about putting the room back together. (Which, of course, included scrubbing down the part of the carpeting where they had… yeah.) It helped him to puzzle his brain together. Apparently he liked sex – but only with certain people. That list seemed to be Luo Binghe. Shen Yuan *probably* existed on that list…

He thought of the succubi cave. Then the bath. Then Shen Yuan taking off his shirt in the middle of the sitting room.

Yeah.

Shen Yuan *definitely* existed on that list.

All that wasn’t too out of scope. Liu Qingge had always been partially aware of the fact that he had some physical desires towards his shixiong. But to *Luo Binghe* as well…? That was startling. And new.

The more he thought about it, comparing what his shixiong made him feel to the man in the other room, the feelings weren’t too dissimilar. He wanted to protect both. Provide for both. He wanted to know and understand them. And he knew he loved Shen Yuan; he could no longer deny that. Every time he thought about him, his chest ached and there was a strange pit there that was only filled when his shixiong was around. It was a type of feeling that slid underneath his skin, coated his lungs, and swelled his heart. It threatened to consume every part of him.

It was terrifying.

Wanting – wanting was scary because there were many things he could *want* and not a lot that he could *have*.

Loving was *dangerous.* There were a delicate few people who had ever dared to claim that feeling from Liu Qingge. His sister was once the last one alive who did. He had never loved someone like this. It was new – worse than stepping into a trap or coming across an unknown and powerful creature. He had no rules for this. No technique to fall back on. And every single misstep could very easily shatter the weakest part of him: his heart.

The living room was pieced back together, laundry switched from one monstrosity to another, and the towel and clothes placed aside to get cleaned. He stared over at the space where he had just laid, allowing himself to be vulnerable in a way he never had before. His eyes fell shut. He became very aware of every drag of breath that filled his lungs and the pounding of his own heartbeat. He allowed himself to *feel.* The door to the bathroom creaked, and his eyes opened.

Luo Binghe stepped out, followed by a puff of steam. A towel sat low over his hips. When his eyes fell onto Liu Qingge, he lit up. Adoration transformed his face, brightening his smile and brightening his eyes. It was so achingly sweet that Liu Qingge had an urge to step over to him and bite him.

(He was trying not to think too hard about the biting thing. It was a bad habit. He had thought he had long since overgrown that need. Apparently not.)

Somehow they drifted together again, and he did not know if he was the one who moved or if it was Luo Binghe. It didn't matter. They met and fit together like two pieces of a puzzle. They kissed. His stomach twisted with a fluttering feeling – it was intoxicating. Like dropping too fast while flying on his sword. Or coming across a particularly powerful beast. Or when Shen Yuan smiled at him. His arms slid around bare, wet skin. Thick muscle moved underneath his fingertips as Luo Binghe caught him and pulled him in closer.

The soft fluttery feeling was very quickly devolving into a more heated one. His back found a wall, with Luo Binghe pinning him against it.

It felt secure. It felt good. He somehow knew he could let go, and Luo Binghe would take care of him. He could give in, be tied down and useless, and he wouldn't be afraid. He dragged his blunt nails across skin, then trailed light fingertips up a spine.

Luo Binghe shivered against him.

With a heavy groan, Liu Qingge pulled away and turned his head.

Kisses followed his jaw, and down the length of his neck.

Eyes falling shut, Liu Qingge murmured, "You just showered."

"This Binghe can shower again," he replied eagerly.

With a humored snort, Liu Qingge bit back a smirk. He reached up, dragged his fingers through damp hair, and caught the back of the brat's head. He forced their eyes to meet. "Get dressed."

"Mm…" Luo Binghe stayed still, taking in Liu Qingge's expression. He reached up. His hand cradled his face. Whatever he saw in Liu Qingge's eyes made him nod. He stepped back, taking the comfort of his solid weight with him, and smiled. "This Binghe will prepare some tea and snacks?"

Liu Qingge nodded. As he parted for the bathroom, he paused. At the last second, he turned and caught the brat in one last kiss. Then he stepped into the still steamy bathroom and closed the door behind him. He tugged off his clothes, lost in thought. Why *should* they stop? Why shouldn't they comfort another, expend every last bit of energy, on sex?

Why *was* he putting a stop to it?

The brat had to know that if he pushed hard enough, Liu Qingge would give in. But he didn't. He respectfully stepped back and let things stay the way they were.

…Liu Qingge did not know if he *wanted* things to stay that way.

After his shower, Liu Qingge wrapped a towel around himself. He opened the bathroom door to find a new set of clothes waiting for him. A smile tugged his lips. He plucked up the pile and changed.

In a brand new set of lounge wear, including a jacket, Liu Qingge wandered back out into the sitting area. He found Luo Binghe waiting there, with the TV quietly playing some music. An array of snacks spread out atop the low table.

“Thanks,” Liu Qingge said, motioning to the clothes. He wandered over to the couch and sat down.

With a bright smile, Luo Binghe handed him a cup of tea. He hesitated before quietly asking, “Shishu… can this Binghe lean against you…?”

Raising an eyebrow, Liu Qingge opened one of his arms. No doubt in his absence, Luo Binghe’s inner demons had risen again. He accepted that tonight he wouldn’t be getting much sleep. A bulk of the night would be easing Luo Binghe’s sorrows, which he was selfishly grateful for.

The more he had to worry about someone else, the less he had to think. It was a welcome distraction.

The two spent some time on the couch, and eventually the leaning turned into a full cuddle. Liu Qingge lay on the couch and Luo Binghe between his legs. He kept waiting for his mind to start screeching, but it never did. It was satisfying to have someone so heavy on him, with a head on his chest. He ran his hands through Luo Binghe’s hair, and down his back, listening to the warmth of his voice.

They had started reading through PIDW again.

“Peerless Cucumber,” Luo Binghe murmured.

“Mn?” Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. The corner of his lip quirked. It was the closest he had ever gotten to laughing aloud *at* Shen Yuan.

“I found a comment written by him, at the bottom of the chapter,” Luo Binghe said. His voice started to lag with fatigue, but neither suggested going into that empty room and laying on that giant bed.

“Read it,” Liu Qingge ordered, his lips snagging into a full smile.

It was an essay that excelled in articulation, absolutely *ripping* apart another commentator. The comment in itself was a piece of work worthy of a Qing Jing peak lord. It was no wonder

Shen Yuan had assumed that role with very little trouble. By the end of the comment, Luo Binghe was giggling.

Shen Yuan had pointed out inaccuracies of another stranger's argument – which Luo Binghe read aloud after. The stranger's comment was how Luo Binghe was "a boring character" that deserved what he got.

"Pure white lotus?" Luo Binghe wheezed. "What?"

Neither of them were privy to Shen Yuan's inner thoughts, but Liu Qingge did not doubt that his shixiong would still refer to his disciple that way. They continued through the novel in that pattern – reading a chapter, and then searching to see if there was a comment by "Peerless Cucumber."

It was fascinating how many wars Shen Yuan incited. He provoked others, angered them to the point that they lost any sense, and completely eviscerated them with word and fact. The man *cited* his sources. Liu Qingge had only seen very little of this at the peak lord meetings, when Shen Yuan would cut in and stop one of their martial siblings from making an ill-informed decision. Most of the time, he sat in the background and tried not to call too much attention to himself.

They reached the point of Liu Qingge's death in the story – it was odd to hear himself as only a passing background piece. He paid attention to the way Luo Binghe's breath hitched, and saw his hands shaking. Gathering the other man in his arms, he pulled him up and kissed the top of his head. He stole the phone with one hand, and used his other to catch Luo Binghe's hand and press it to his chest. He took in a long, slow breath and said, "I am fine."

Luo Binghe watched him with wet eyes and nodded.

"Listen." Liu Qingge pressed the man's head to his chest, over his heart. "Alive. And well."

Lips trembling, Luo Binghe nodded again. He rolled, hooking his legs around Liu Qingge's, and wrapped him up in a tight hold. It was understandable that the topic of death was a little triggering for the disciple at the moment. Fictional or not.

Liu Qingge took over reading aloud. His eyes burned from fatigue, but he ignored it. Time was passing slowly, and neither would sleep until Shen Yuan was back in their arms. He watched the story unfold. It was fascinating how their life in the other world seemed on track with what was written, at least until the point where Shen Yuan "transmigrated." That's where things started to diverge. They read through the entire arc of the demonic invasion.

"...is there really a dream demon in your head?" Liu Qingge asked with a frown.

"...yes."

It was all he was going to ask, for now. He continued reading. Outside, the dark night sky started to lighten with the whispers of the morning. Next was the Immortal Conference. They reached a point where the Luo Binghe of the story attempted to save a young girl from the poisoning of Without A Cure.

Then the sex started.

Liu Qingge had to set the phone aside, cheeks burning, as he stared up at the ceiling.

"...it did *not* happen that way," Luo Binghe grumbled.

With a snort, Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow and stared down at the sticky demon.

"It *didn't!"* Luo Binghe balked. He looked so affronted, Liu Qingge couldn't help it. He almost laughed. "*Shishu!"* the brat whined. "It didn't! This Binghe would never! He's saving himself for his-"

"Stop!" Liu Qingge begged. Laughter danced in his voice, threatening to spring free from his lips. It must be delirium from fatigue. "Shameless!"

Amping up his whining, Luo Binghe threw a fake tantrum. He absolutely was only playing it up to try and get Liu Qingge to *really* laugh. It almost worked. "This Binghe only *wants* his shizun and shishu!" He continued, "He's only thought of his shizun touching him, and his shishu's pretty mouth around his-"

Liu Qingge clamped a hand over his mouth before any more perverse things left it.
"*Binghe!"*

Eyes dark and wanting, Luo Binghe licked the palm of his hand.

That started a war. The two twisted on the couch, with Liu Qingge attempting to lock Luo Binghe's arms, and they fell off and hit the ground. Legs wrapped around his waist, and he elbowed and shoved in an attempt to regain control. They rolled. Liu Qingge was pinned for a second, before he slipped out of the hold and shoved Luo Binghe down. He ended up on top with Luo Binghe on his stomach and his face smashed into the carpet. He twisted the brat's arm and held it down against his back.

Luo Binghe squirmed, hips rolling back with his legs bracing.

With a hum, Liu Qingge kissed his cheek.

Immediately, all the fight fled from the half-demon. He lay, panting on the ground. It was *very* satisfying. "Shishu…" Luo Binghe breathed. He watched him with a dark, simmering heat.

Liu Qingge eased his hold, allowing the other to flip over onto his back. He bracketed his arms around Luo Binghe's head, and kissed him slowly. Cautious hands drifted up his sides, slid underneath his shirt, and trailed along his skin. He sank into that exploration, while tilting his head to get a better angle to deepen their kiss.

Hands crawled up his chest, and groped at the meat of his pecks. Heat shocked down Liu Qingge's body. He wanted to bite. Instead, he pulled back and breathed heavily against Luo Binghe's cheek. Feeling overwhelmed him all at once. He muttered, "...bathroom." With that, he sprang up and left Luo Binghe on the ground.

There was no other word for it: he fled.

By the time he came back out, Luo Binghe had cleared the left overs and put away the tea. He lounged on the couch, waiting patiently. Without question, he scooted over for his shishu to slip back into position.

“You read, then,” Liu Qingge said. He unlocked the phone, shoved it into his hands, and sank onto the couch.

Luo Binghe stared down at the screen. He snuggled back into Liu Qingge’s lap, and rested his cheek against his chest. “...Shishu?”

“Mn?” Liu Qingge draped his arms loosely around him.

“...is it wrong that this Binghe wants…?” Luo Binghe asked.

“What?”

Eyes lowering, Luo Binghe pressed his lips into a thin line. He broke out of the hold and sat up, taking his warmth with him. He turned to look outside at the waning night. “This Binghe is selfish. He wants so much.”

“...we want you, too,” Liu Qingge forced out. His skin prickled with a blush, and he found himself embarrassed.

“...but this Binghe is zealous. This Binghe wants a *lot.”*

Where had this come from? Liu Qingge closed his eyes with a sigh. He reached over and placed a hand on Luo Binghe’s shoulder. He squeezed it. “Binghe,” he said, softly. He didn’t know the words for what he had to say. It might be true that Luo Binghe *wanted* a lot. But his wanting had gotten them where they were, hadn’t it? If not for him, Liu Qingge would probably still be denying his own feelings for Shen Yuan. Even when Luo Binghe had wanted everything, he always held back.

When he thought Liu Qingge rejected his feelings, he had taken a step back and respected him for it. He never pushed or forced. It was Liu Qingge who initiated.

How the hell would he *say* all of that?

Jaw clenched, he grabbed Luo Binghe and pulled him back into his chest. He held him tight, feeling embarrassed and uncertain. He buried his face into the other man’s shoulder. “Thank you. For wanting.”

Luo Binghe melted into him. His eyes shined with adoration. “So… it’s okay to want?”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge said. He couldn’t say everything he wanted to, but he hoped it was enough.

“So…” Luo Binghe caught Liu Qingge’s face in his hand, lifting up his chin so that they were eye to eye. “It’s okay for Mingbo to want, too?”

Oh.

Oh.

This little brat.

Liu Qingge's mouth fell open, and he stared at him. He didn't know what to say. Somehow the brat had deduced what was holding him back – before even *he* understood. But he did now. That's why he didn't want to follow Luo Binghe into the shower. It was why he held off and forced the two apart whenever things got heated. Because in his mind, once was enough. Once *should* be enough. Once was *already* covetous and greedy. Anything else would be a loss of control and *bad.*

…right?

Luo Binghe, the fucking brat, had managed to walk Liu Qingge into his own trap. It's okay to *want.*

…was it?

"Brat," Liu Qingge said, weakly.

Luo Binghe smiled, already knowing that he won.

It was terrifying, to want. But Liu Qingge was the War God of Bai Zhan. He *shouldn't* run from things that scare him.

"Thank you," Luo Binghe, the cheeky little shit, said, "for wanting."

With an annoyed huff, Liu Qingge grabbed him and dragged him down. He bit him, as revenge for this little stunt, and then kissed the bruise. They devolved into another mess of limbs, kisses, and searching hands.

They didn't get far this time. The long night started to catch up to them, and it was hard to be too inspired by any heat. Despite his best efforts, Liu Qingge felt his eyelids dragging shut. He lay on his back with Luo Binghe on his chest, their legs tangled.

"Ming-gege…?" Luo Binghe asked, drowsily.

"Mn?"

"...take more of what you want," he said. "Take it all."

Heart pounding, Liu Qingge squeezed his shoulder. He considered that thought, and wondered what would be the worst thing if he did.

In that drowsy, sleepy moment, he couldn't think of a single reason why not.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

6.2k words, 26 ish minute reading time.

I appreciate the well wishes! And the receptive response to the updated rating... I will admit I am a little thin-faced... so please excuse me if it takes a bit to respond to some of your comments... teehee

I really do appreciate all the love and support I've received for this fic <3 It's been a fun journey. Initially I had thought 36 for final chapter count, but I think it will be closer to 40.

Again... health is still iffy, so my apologies for any errors!

Content Warning: there's a lot of innuendos, heavy flirting, dirty talk, suggestion of power dynamics, etc...

Nothing explicit happens in this chapter, but it's Binghe, so... *vague gesture*. You know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A loud noise tore into Luo Binghe’s dreamless sleep, and he launched himself off of the bed – only to fall to the ground. His shoulder checked the low table, and he spilled out on the floor with an irritated groan. It took too long for his mind to catch up. He remembered the previous night, and his stupid idea of taking sanctuary in this cursed realm. Some of his limbs were numb from his sleeping position, and he had a crick in his neck. Oh, how he missed his cultivation. Breathing in through his nose, he sat up.

Liu Qingge groggily snatched the phone off the low table and glared at the face of it. He looked more sleep-mussed than usual, probably from their night spent on the couch. With one raised eyebrow, he silently asked Luo Binghe if he was alright after his fall.

Waving a hand, Luo Binghe nodded. He lifted up onto his knees and knelt beside the couch. He held out his hand for the phone. As he suspected, his shishu was grateful that he wouldn’t have to bother answering it. He deposited it into Luo Binghe’s hand and worked on rubbing circles on his temples.

Smothering a yawn, Luo Binghe pressed the green answering button and held the phone up to his ear. Before he could say a word of greeting, he heard:

“HA! *Biiiiiiiiitch!* Found your gay ass! Cucumber-bro, you’re so dead. What the hell? What the actual hell!! Why did you send me that much money!? That’s too much?? Bro?? *BRO???* Take it back!”

By the pure element of deduction, Luo Binghe frowned distastefully and said, “Shang Qinghua?”

The other end of the line gasped, then squeaked.

“Shang Qinghua?” Liu Qingge asked, dazedly. He leaned over to listen to the conversation better, head pressed against Luo Binghe’s own.

It was the only thing stopping Luo Binghe from promising the little rat of a man some pain. He glowered.

“Ah… ha. Ha. L-L-Lord… Lord Luo! Did… did I hear… Liu-shidi?”

“What was this for?” Luo Binghe asked, voice hard and deadly.

“Ahhhh…. Ha. Um. This is… um. Okay! W-Where… where is Cucumber-bro?”

Luo Binghe sneered. “Not. Here.”

The other end of the line went silent. He heard some shuffling, and quietly the low rumbling voice of a certain demon.

A long sigh escaped Liu Qingge. He took the phone from Luo Binghe and said, “Shang Qinghua.”

“Liu-shidi,” Shang Qinghua said miserably, sounding close to tears. “...hi. Wait. You’re alone with Bing-ge??”

Expression spasming, Liu Qingge scowled. “Yes. Yuan is not here. We will tell him to… communicate with you later.”

“Ahh… ha. Okay.”

More silence. There was a loud gulp on the other end. Then a squeak.

“M-my k-king? Ah!”

“Lord Luo.” The deep, rich baritone of Mobei rumbled through the speaker.

Leaning closer to Liu Qingge, Luo Binghe sighed and said, “Yes?”

“How do we return?”

“...this lord is still researching that.”

There was a grunt on the other side of the phone, which Luo Binghe interpreted as, *We should probably find time to discuss this. In person if we can.* Swallowing an undignified whine, Luo

Binghe sighed. The two of them had not known each other that long – there was their first encounter at the Immortal Conference, which Luo Binghe paid back tenfold when he crawled out of the Abyss. After that, though, Mobei had been unerringly loyal without question. He hardly blinked at bowing to someone so much younger than him, even if that person were half-demon. He had even given Luo Binghe some pointers on his demonic heritage.

Mobei, time and time again, proved that he valued loyalty above all else. It was as if he had always expected that Luo Binghe would rise up from the depths of the Abyss and demand his fealty. He slid into the role with ease, sometimes acting both as a advisor and as a…

It felt too *naive* to say "friend." The two of them hadn't progressed that far in their relationship.

And… both were still far too wary of another to trust another blindly.

Still, the demon was right. They probably *should* meet up, if they could, to see if more minds than his own could untangle this mess. Even if Luo Binghe was the one at fault. "...when Shizun returns, we will coordinate."

Appeased, Mobei must have handed the phone back to his little rat of a spy because there was a breathy squeak into the phone.

"Ha! Okay. Well… now that's settled-"

"Shang Qinghua." Luo Binghe glowered.

"...er, y-yes? L-Lord Luo…?"

"Ever threaten Shizun again, this one will repay the favor and rip your tongue from your throat."

The other end of the line went dead silent. For a few moments, Luo Binghe wondered if the connection went dead.

"You will not touch him," Mobei growled a few moments later into the receiver.

Luo Binghe bared his teeth, ready to growl in turn. Only… he wasn't a demon here. He was a human. It didn't feel natural to suddenly start making noise. Somehow Mobei's deep voice made his growling sound *natural.*

Unfair.

"...he will not threaten your mate again," Mobei added, almost as an apology.

"I-It was – a joke!" Shang Qinghua cried. "J-Joking, my lord! I was joking! I would *never!* Cucumber-bro is my *bro!* He-"

"*Enough,"* Mobei said, wisely.

Silence.

“Goodbye.”

The line went dead. Luo Binghe frowned thoughtfully, until he caught his shishu staring at him out of the corner of his eye. He straightened and cocked his head to one side. “Shishu?”

“Speak like that again,” Liu Qingge said, breathlessly.

Luo Binghe raised an eyebrow. He studied his shishu’s expression. Faint blush, slightly parted lips, and large pupils. Oh. He smothered the smile that wanted to fill his expression. Reaching over, he caught Liu Qingge by the chin and spoke coldly, “Is this what Qingge requests of this lord?”

“Impertinent,” Liu Qingge murmured, his eyes falling into a lustful haze.

“How should this lord address the Bai Zhan peak lord?” Luo Binghe asked, lifting up onto the couch. He felt just daring enough to slide into his shishu’s lap, and was delighted when hands clamped around his hips.

Liu Qingge made a thoughtful noise, leaning back to look up at Luo Binghe through his lashes.

Luo Binghe reached up and caught his shishu’s loose hair in his hand, and used it to tug Liu Qingge’s head back and expose his throat. “Does Qingge like this…?” he murmured, feeling his own blood heat up with the idea. “Does he like it when this lord is stern?” He leaned down to press a kiss to his throat. “Does he like it when someone else is taking charge…?” Tugging sharply on his hair, Luo Binghe bit down on his pulse point. He sucked on his skin mercilessly.

A shaky sound escaped Liu Qingge, and he arched into Luo Binghe. His eyes widened in shock.

Knowing his shishu, Luo Binghe eased the bite with a kiss and pulled away. He let go of his hair and gave him space.

Liu Qingge breathed through his nose, surprised. He blinked a few times, slowly coming back to himself. The corner of his lip quirked shyly. “Brat.”

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe said, softening his voice. He leaned in as a quiet question.

Answering, his shishu closed his eyes and kissed him. They both had morning breath, and nature was quietly insisting that Luo Binghe heed its call. He ignored it, soaking in every last bit of his shishu that he could get.

This was just one day with a promised future of many, and still he wanted everything that he could get.

Liu Qingge didn’t seem to mind either way.

Morning light had long since faded into the brightness of an early afternoon. The two had only slept for a few hours the previous night, yet neither seemed eager to try and sleep more. Luo Binghe managed to pull himself out of the arms of his beloved and started to prepare for the day. While he cooked breakfast, his shishu took his turn in the bathroom.

Then both sat at the table with the empty seat.

“Miss him?” Liu Qingge asked.

Luo Binghe’s eyes watered and he nodded. Both had hoped that the call that morning would be news about their Yuan coming home, and instead it was a rodent. He poked at his congee. “...Shishu?”

“Mn?”

“...are we going to tell Shizun…?” Luo Binghe asked. The two of them both were in love with him. *Waiting* for something to happen wouldn’t change anything.

Color drenched Liu Qingge’s skin. He stared down at his congee, then his brows knitted together. “You should tell him. He cares a lot about you.”

“A-Yuan cares a *lot* about Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe countered.

“...Yuan sacrificed himself for you,” Liu Qingge pointed out.

“You were there for A-Yuan when I was in the Abyss,” Luo Binghe said. “You’re always there for him. He always gets so happy when you visit.”

“He’s nice,” Liu Qingge told him, grumbling.

“A-Yuan gets distracted by your legs and ass,” Luo Binghe retorted.

Liu Qingge choked on air. “*B-Binghe!”*

“He does!” Luo Binghe whined. “This Binghe used to get really jealous… When you showed up in this world in that short shirt, A-Yuan was practically drooling! I don’t think that he even knows he’s admiring you…”

That… was it, wasn’t it?

Luo Binghe frowned down at the table. The dream he had stepped into with his shizun – the one where his A-Yuan kissed him and he had exclaimed that he was "gay." It had seemed like some sort of self-discovery.

“How… can you say such embarrassing things…?” Liu Qingge groaned into his hands.

“We need A-Yuan to realize he *likes* you,” Luo Binghe said.

“Why me!? *You* are the one he is obsessed with!”

“Ming-gege should just kiss A-Yuan and see what happens,” Luo Binghe said, stubbornly.

“Or,” Liu Qingge pointed at him, ruthlessly, “you could stop being a coward and *tell him*.”

“I *have,”* Luo Binghe whined. “I thought that Shizun was so disgusted by me – but… but I think he’s just…”

“Oblivious,” Liu Qingge sighed. “So. What now?”

“Ming-gege should wear the short shirt again,” Luo Binghe said.

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge kicked him under the table. “Be appropriate.”

“No! This Binghe is *serious,”* Luo Binghe said. “We need to get A-Yuan to accept his feelings!”

Liu Qingge deadpanned. “By being shameless and inappropriate?”

“Ming-gege is really alluring,” Luo Binghe grumbled, “A-Yuan will want to pounce on him. He already makes eyes at you…”

“Y-You…!”

With a smile, Luo Binghe met his shishu’s eyes. He stretched out his leg underneath the table and rubbed his foot along the inside of his leg. “Gege should take what he wants.”

Liu Qingge jerked in surprise. “Binghe. Not! At! The! Table!”

“Does Gege want Binghe *on* the table, then?” Luo Binghe fluttered his lashes.

Face red, Liu Qingge stared at him in bewilderment. “S-Shameless! Binghe!”

Laughing, Luo Binghe set his head in his hands and said, “Okay, okay. Sorry, sorry… this Binghe is done teasing his shishu.”

In the end, Liu Qingge was right. Both were cowards. Neither wanted to sit Shen Yuan down and tell him how they felt. It was one thing to test the waters and tease and see how much Luo Binghe could get away with, another to hold out his heart and watch it get sincerely rejected.

Luo Binghe couldn’t help but feel that if he *did* tell Shen Yuan how he felt, that his shizun would find some way to convince himself that his poor “little sheep” was just confused…

He sighed through his nose with the bare hints of a plan beginning to brew in the back of his mind.

The day crawled. Luo Binghe attempted to keep busy. He cleaned up around the apartment, put away their clothes, prepared tea, and went as far as to freshen up the linens on Shen Yuan's bed. He even scrubbed the bathroom.

The war god spent his time warming up in the sitting area, working through different sword forms and routines. He was beautiful to watch. And distracting. They ended up sparring again, kissing, touching each other some more, before showering separately.

(Unfortunately… Liu Qingge still wouldn't go into the shower with him. One day, Luo Bingghe would get to his shishu flushed red underneath the steaming water, water droplets gliding down his skin.

One day…)

Dressed in clothes for the day, the two sat together on the couch and began to read more through the Proud Immortal Demon Way. When Luo Binghe skipped the scene where Shizun tossed him into the Abyss, the war god didn't say anything. Predictably, he had skipped one painful thing only to reach the point in the story where *everything* was awful. Some parts were fine. Others…

In the end, he handed the phone over to his shishu and collapsed into his lap as he listened. Half-listened.

Liu Qingge started running his fingers through his hair. The more he read, the more his voice shifted from a readerly-tone to one that was halting. He was horrified.

Sometimes he would stop reading aloud altogether and read in silence.

He didn't ask Luo Binghe if any of it were true.

They continued to read. Not everything matched up to Luo Binghe's real experience. Book Binghe wasn't prepared for the Endless Abyss.

(How had Luo Binghe not realized how much his shizun had *prepared* him for the Abyss? It wasn't until he watched his book counterpart stumble around that he realized *how much* Shizun had done for him. So much knowledge was passed onto him; nighthunts chosen to nurture his confidence in battle, books left around for him to find, and even lectures for him on the many different creatures that exist on the edges of the cultivation world. Even if his shizun had never wanted him to fall, he had found ways to make it *easier* when he did.

The Abyss was still horrific beyond imagination and there were some things Luo Binghe would never be able to talk about, but he certainly made fewer mistakes than his counterpart in the book.)

There was a point where Book Binghe had run into a demon in the Abyss – one that attempted to cajole and trick him. She was a cannibal with the initial intentions to eat him. Book Binghe had charmed his way to sit *at* her dinner table, rather than be on it. Then…

horrifyingly enough, there was a long and gratuitous sex scene that Liu Qingge could not read through.

He got as far as to say, "...unbound her robes, allowing her brilliant pearly-white peaches spring free - *peaches? What?"* before he sputtered to an embarrassed stop.

"Shishu, let's just reenact those scenes and not read through them," Luo Binghe mumbled into his thigh, shamelessly.

Liu Qingge snorted and tugged his hair in a mild warning.

"This Binghe has decent peaches-"

"*Binghe,"* Liu Qingge choked.

"...does this one not?"

"Stop. *Shameless!"*

Laughing, Luo Binghe rolled to look up at his shishu. He grinned and traced a finger along his jaw, enchanted by the way his skin had turned pink. "What did 'Peerless Cucumber' think of the peaches?"

Liu Qingge's eyebrows twitched. He opened his mouth, probably to utter another "shameless," but was drawn in too much by curiosity. He scrolled down, and paused when he finally found what he was looking for. His lips drew into a humored smirk.

"Shishu… don't just read it to yourself," Luo Binghe whined. "This Binghe wants to know…"

The smirk grew.

"'This chapter is a complete and utter mockery of literature. To call it such would not only be lying to yourself but also insulting every piece of literature in existence. Have you ever considered doing research or, just a suggestion, getting any form of basic education? Ever? The very first person we run into in the Endless Abyss is apparently not only a supposedly god-like youthful beauty, but also not insane? Was there any research done on the effects of loneliness and the negative impacts it has on the cognitive functions and mental health of a person? She said she's been alone for over a century! Also, how can she be a cannibal if she is the only one of her kind within the Endless Abyss? She herself said that she was stranded with no other company! Not since she fell in a century prior! How is she eating other people if the first person she has seen in a century was Binghe!?'"

Liu Qingge stopped reading. His head rolled back and his breath hitched like he was about to laugh.

Grinning, Luo Binghe took over. Shen Yuan went on about how the woman *could* have been an interesting ally or even villain! If only Airplane hadn't given in to some arbitrary papapa!

Those were the actual words his shizun had used – *his* shizun, Shen Yuan, Shen Qingqiu, the Qing Jing Peak Lord, the Xiu Ya sword, wrote: “papapa.” Luo Binghe was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes.

Wordlessly, both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe decided to get through the Abyss arc by reading through Shen Yuan’s commentary. They ended up laughing through most of it, which was much better than the solemn mood the two of them had held before. When it came time for lunch, Liu Qingge followed Luo Binghe into the kitchen with the phone. He leaned on the counter, reading another comment aloud. “‘...did you open up a thesaurus for this section and use every single word underneath ‘breasts’?’”

Luo Binghe snorted and nearly dropped his knife. Not only had his shizun written the word “breasts,” but his shishu just *said* it aloud. When the war god did not continue, Luo Binghe provoked him by saying, “This Binghe did *not* run into a… what was it? Cave infested with wanting maidens?”

“*Wanton.* Be quiet,” Liu Qingge said. He set down the phone and wandered towards the front door. Now that Luo Binghe paid attention, he heard muffled voices in the hall.

Lightning struck him in the chest, and his heart nearly leaped out of his throat. Hastily, he turned off the heat on the oven and set aside the knife. He dashed across the kitchen, running into his shishu in his haste.

Liu Qingge shot him an annoyed glance. Then his attention turned back to the door. Both of them stilled their breaths, listening in.

“...just give her time.”

A sigh. “...I know.”

Shizun! Luo Binghe lurched.

Liu Qingge’s hand shot towards the handle.

Just as quickly, Luo Binghe caught his hand. He squeezed it and met his shishu’s sharpened glance with a sheepish smile. “...Shizun is talking to someone. Wouldn’t it be rude to interrupt?”

Liu Qingge’s expression dropped, unamused. He knew that Luo Binghe intended to eavesdrop. He did not stop him.

“Yuan-di,” another male voice spoke. He sighed. “Stop doing this.”

Silence.

“...don’t give me that look. I’m not asking you to *fix* yourself, di. I am asking you to *let us in*.”

“I get it, er-ge, I do-”

“No you don’t. I can see it on your face. You’re planning to lock yourself up in that apartment again and die quietly like a wounded cat.”

“...it’s not like that.”

“Okay. So. What *were* you going to do?”

More silence.

The man, Shen Yuan’s older brother, groaned. “Yuan. Didi. You’re such a little shit. Come here.”

“Just – stop! Stop it-” Shen Yuan struggled. By the sounds of it, the two had embraced. He sighed. Voice more muffled, he said, “...I have guests.”

“I know you do. Don’t get me started on that. Also, don’t change the subject.” There was a pause, and the sound of hands slapping each other. It ended with Shen Yuan making a sharp squawk of protest. “Yuan-di. We’re not Mom and Dad. You know that, right? I know I said some shit when we were younger. I didn’t mean any of it. I’m serious. Please. This is me *asking* you to tell me, alright? Tell me when it’s bad. Please. We *want* to be here with you. We want every last second we can get with our littlest brother. We miss you. Is that getting through your thick skull? Do you understand?” He paused. “Da-ge is better at this. So is Meimei. Too bad one is on a business trip and you’re on the other’s shit list.” His brother groaned. “Why is it up to *me* to corral you?”

“Then *don’t!”*

“Why are you making this so difficult!?”

“Because you’re weird!” Shen Yuan protested.

There were some more slapping sounds that ended with someone wheezing. His brother grumbled, “Fucking noodle arms, your elbows are like knives. I think you bruised a rib.”

“Good.”

The other man let out a sharp, dry laugh. “You’re such a little shit, di.”

There was a sigh. “...I get it, I really do. I wasn’t going to go off and die like a cat, or whatever. I heard Ying-mei, alright? I get it… and…” Shen Yuan was silent for a while. When he spoke again, his voice wavered, “I am sorry.”

Liu Qingge reached his capacity on eavesdropping, and he knocked his foot against the door. He raised a challenging eyebrow at Luo Binghe before he unlocked the door and swung it open.

“Yuan-gege!” Luo Binghe cried, and he shoved his shishu aside to grab onto his shizun. He wrapped him up in a tight hold and glanced up at the other man in the hallway.

There was no friendliness in this man's expression, despite being underneath one of Luo Binghe's most charming smiles. His face was sharp and cold. He stood with his arms crossed, tall and thin like a sword. As cutting as one, too.

Luo Binghe affirmed their suspicions from the other night – this man *was* their driver.

"*Binghe,*" Shen Yuan admonished. Flustered, he tried to escape from his hold.

To save his shizun some face, Luo Binghe let go. Though he wasn't afraid to pout. "I just missed Yuan-gege…"

With a heavy sigh, Shizun yielded. "I know. I'm sorry." He reached up to pat Luo Binghe's shoulder. "I'll be right in. I promise."

"I'm making lunch! I can make enough for one more if your brother wants to stay," Luo Binghe said with a bright smile.

"No," his brother said, tightly. Then belatedly, as if he were about to pull out a tooth, he added, "Thanks."

Shen Yuan winced. He rubbed the back of his neck and made an excuse for his brother's rudeness, "You probably have a busy day ahead of you. Thanks… for dropping me off." After a moment's hesitation, he added, "I'll keep you updated."

"You better." The brother cut both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge glares. With that, he turned on his heel and started back down the hall. As he neared the end, he paused.

He hovered long enough that Shen Yuan cautiously called out, "Er-ge?"

"...look," his brother said, rubbing underneath his nose. "Do you know that we love you, di? No matter what. We love you." He glanced over his shoulder to look him in the eye. "I mean it."

Blinking, Shizun straightened. He flushed pink and said, "Of course. I… love you guys, too."

"No." His brother sighed, wiping a hand over his face. "I was a stupid kid. I said some stupid things. I didn't mean any of them."

"I get it."

"No, you don't." His brother groaned. "Look. I sucked a guy's dick last summer. So, we're cool."

Shen Yuan's mouth dropped open.

"This?" His brother continued, motioning between the three of them. "It's cool. It's fine. We get it."

Sputtering, Shen Yuan threw wide-eyed glances at both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge. "...n-no! No! It's not – *no!!* It's not-"

Turning away, his brother waved goodbye. "See you, di."

"*Ge!?"* Shen Yuan cried. "Ge! It's not like that!"

Ignoring the cries of protest, his brother strode down the hall and paused only as he reached the bend. There he turned back to Luo Binghe and made two different gestures. Both were a little too blurry and too far away for Luo Binghe to *really* see. He guessed it was the universal "*I'm watching you, if you hurt my brother I'll slit your throat"* kind of deal.

In that instant, Luo Binghe decided he liked Shen Yuan's brother. He wholeheartedly agreed: if anyone *did* hurt his shizun, they *did* deserve to die.

After some more sputtering, Shen Yuan cleared his throat. He plucked a bag off the ground and turned, pushing against Luo Binghe's chest to shove him back inside the apartment. "We're not talking about that. *Any* of that. Understood?"

"I don't know… I think Ming-gege needs to explain it to me," Luo Binghe said, fluttering his eyelashes at him.

Liu Qingge blushed and averted his eyes.

"*Binghe!"* Shen Yuan snapped.

With a laugh, Luo Binghe allowed himself to be herded into the apartment. As soon as the door shut, he threw himself at his shizun and pulled him to his chest. "Shizun! Shizun, this disciple is so happy you're home!"

"Mn," Liu Qingge agreed. His hands twitched at his sides.

Luo Binghe met his eyes. The corner of his lip quirked, and he mouthed, *"Take it."*

...take more of what you want, he had told his shishu. *Take it all.*

After a few seconds of hesitation, Liu Qingge moved. His expression collapsed, eyes glistening with relief and quiet grief. He reached out and tenderly took one of Shen Yuan's hands. His lips trembled minutely.

With a saddened smile, Luo Binghe let go to guide his shizun into the war god's waiting arms.

To his surprise, Liu Qingge stepped closer. With one arm, he brought Shen Yuan into his chest; his other arm caught Luo Binghe by the waist and dragged him in close. He tied all three of them into a tight embrace, body shaking. His hold remained gentle, even as his hands gathered white-knuckled fistfuls of fabric. Breath shuddering, he murmured into Shen Yuan's hair, "Welcome home."

"A-Ah…"

Luo Binghe melted. He sank into the hold, head resting on his shishu's shoulder, with one arm clinging onto his shizun. His eyes fell shut. He finally felt right. He felt *whole.* This was how it was always meant to be – the three of them. Together. He felt indomitable. He felt powerful enough to raze the world to the ground. He felt… wanted.

He felt *loved.*

They stood that way for a while. It was Shizun who broke away first, his thin face unable to stand all of the attention. He pushed back against their chests, flustered. "What is this, ah? Two adult men! Acting like children! It was only one night!" His scorn had no actual heat behind it. There was a bright blush on his face, and he refused to meet either of their eyes. "Where's my cane? I think it dropped when Binghe-"

Liu Qingge swept down and held it out for him in an instant.

"Ah… thanking Qingge," Shen Yuan murmured. He stood, staring at his cane as if he had forgotten what it was for. His hair fell forward and covered his eyes. Reaching up, he rubbed the back of his neck. A bag hung around his elbow, and only when it knocked against the side of his head did he seem to remember it. "Oh, yeah." He let the bag slide down his arm and he caught it in his hand. Then he lifted it up for either one of them to take.

Curious, Liu Qingge took it first. He peered inside and slid out a box.

"Phones," Shen Yuan said, more composed now that he wasn't in the middle of physical attention. He straightened and let his cane rest against the wall beside the door. "For both of you. They're not top of the line or anything, just something for the both of you in case we get separated again. I will help you set them up, and we can have each other's location on so we can always find another."

"Shizun thinks of everything!" Luo Binghe said, delightedly.

"Mn," the war god added, twisting the box around to peer at it quizzically. "Later." He set the bag with its phones aside and asked, "Would Yuan like a bath?"

"This disciple will prepare lunch!" Luo Binghe said excitedly. "It will be ready once Shizun is done bathing!"

"Ah - both of you are fussing!" Shen Yuan grumbled, but he allowed himself to be herded toward the bathroom.

"Bathe. I'll get clothes," the war god ordered, and he left Shen Yuan at the bathroom door to get him a fresh set of clothes.

"Qingge, I'll, uh, leave the door unlocked so you can just set the clothes on the counter," Shen Yuan called. His eyes slid from where the war god disappeared back to Luo Binghe. His expression was thoughtful. Then he stepped back into the bathroom and closed the door. The sound of running water roared moments later.

Turning back towards the stove, Luo Binghe set to work on their meal. He found himself inspired, thinking of many dishes to welcome his shizun home.

Liu Qingge came back out of the bedroom with a pile of clothes in his hand. Then he reached the bathroom door and froze.

Inside, the shower had a glass door that prevented water from falling into the rest of the room. It was successful in *that* endeavor, just not so successful in any… privacy. If someone were showering, there was only steam to obscure them.

The war god stared at the doorknob as if it had turned into a rabid beast. His hand raised and lowered several times. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and knocked on the door.

No answer.

Face bright red, Liu Qingge cursed under his breath. He charged forward and threw the door open. He stopped immediately, eyes widening. His jaw dropped.

“Ah, thank you, Qingge! You can just set them-”

The war god tossed the pile of clothes into the room and slammed the door shut.

Luo Binghe had to set aside his knife to take a moment to collect himself. He slapped a hand over his mouth, trying to swallow back the insane need to *laugh.*

“Shut it!” The war god snapped.

Falling against the counter, Luo Binghe caught his head in his hands. His shoulders shook with repressed laughter. He gave up, and giggled into his forearms. Footsteps ran up to him. He braced himself, just as a fist slammed into his side. He wheezed.

“Brat!”

“Shishu, you-”

“*Shut up!”*

“But-”

“*NO!”*

Food piled high atop the table. Luo Binghe swelled with pride as he watched both of his beloved stare at it with stars in their eyes. While the food had cooked, Shen Yuan set up both of their phones. He was in the process of walking Liu Qingge through different things he

called “apps” when lunch was fully prepared. The three of them sat down at their spots, which filled Luo Binghe with an indescribable amount of joy.

“Binghe studied,” Liu Qingge said. “You can eat everything.”

Shen Yuan stalled and stared up at Luo Binghe wide-eyed. “All of it?”

Proud of himself, Luo Binghe nodded. He tried not to smile too smugly when he said, “This Binghe researched alternatives and meals that Shizun could eat! I am still learning, so please forgive any mistakes!”

“Binghe, this looks *amazing,”* Shen Yuan praised. He excitedly started filling his plate, his dark eyes glittering with unrestrained eagerness.

The meal was mostly silent, due to everyone enjoying their food. Luo Binghe restrained his happy grin into a polite smile, watching out of the corner of his eye as his shizun practically danced in his seat while scooping his mouth full of food.

Liu Qingge’s sharp expression had softened so completely it was like dough. His eyes held such unadulterated adoration, slipping between both Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe himself.

It was almost perfect.

…almost.

Any conversation the three of them had did not brush on any serious topics. Shen Yuan went on about the phones, and how they could use them. Then he asked what the two of them did overnight.

Exchanging a subtle glance with his shishu, Luo Binghe said, “Shishu instructed this Binghe!” It wasn’t a lie. His shishu *had* instructed him. Cheekily, he couldn’t help but add, “He’s a really hands-on teacher!”

Underneath the table, Liu Qingge kicked him.

“Oh?” Shen Yuan asked, intrigued.

Luo Binghe managed to keep the conversation civil, withholding back the urge to keep dropping innuendos. It would almost be scientific to see how many of them could pass over his shizun’s head. In the end, he decided to save his shishu’s dignity. He realized then that both him and the war god had wordlessly agreed not to mention last night to Shen Yuan. For him, it wasn’t as if he felt guilty or ashamed. Rather, he had the distinct feeling that as soon as his shizun heard, the man might take it the wrong way.

Considering that Luo Binghe and his shizun had *monumentally* failed at communication previously, he wanted to approach this situation carefully. He wanted *both* his shizun and his shishu. Maybe now, he and his shishu could work *together* to slowly break down Shen Yuan’s walls.

At least, maybe get him to admit his feelings for shishu. Perhaps there was a chance that one day Luo Binghe could win his heart as well…

As soon as everyone cleaned their plates, Luo Binghe jumped up to clear the table. To his dismay, he couldn't carry everything at once. "Shishu!" He cried, appalled that the war god started to gather a few of the plates.

Instead of answering, Liu Qingge smirked at him. He took his load back into the kitchen to drop them off.

"Oh, I might have some tupperware for the leftovers," Shen Yuan said, thoughtfully. He rose from the table and walked into the kitchen. He moved about without his cane. It must mean he was feeling better.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe whined, "this disciple can handle it…"

Liu Qingge snorted. After he dropped off the plates, he went back to the table to gather some more.

"Shishu!" Luo Binghe complained. "*Shizun!"* He cried when he saw his shizun pull out tupperware onto the counter.

A small laugh escaped Shen Yuan. He covered his mouth with a hand, eyes little crescents as he looked up at him. "Binghe," he admonished, laughter in his tone. "Can't we help, too?"

Luo Binghe deflated and petulantly said, "This disciple can handle it…"

"Controlling," Liu Qingge accused.

"N-No!"

"Mn," Shen Yuan said with a grave nod. "A perfectionist."

"Shizun," Luo Binghe whined.

Coming up behind him, Liu Qingge snorted. He bumped their shoulders together, with his eyes glinting playfully. "Brat."

"Shishu…"

With another laugh, Shen Yuan set the tupperware aside. "Okay, okay… we'll stop. Dry your eyes." His expression shifted as he looked at the two of them. The mood around him shifted from teasing playfulness to something melancholic. His smile grew heavy.

"What?" Liu Qingge asked.

"Oh," Shen Yuan said, startled. He glanced away, his skin coloring. "Nothing."

"Yuan," the war god pressed, stalking towards him. "Tell us."

“Qingge,” Shen Yuan sputtered. “It’s nothing! It’s-” His voice dried up when Liu Qingge stood in front of him, hands on his hips. He towered over Shizun, making him shrink back until his back hit the counter. He stared up at the war god with widened eyes.

Instead of saying a word, Liu Qingge raised a single eyebrow and set his feet.

“It really isn’t anything,” Shen Yuan said. “Nothing bad! I…” His shoulders curled up to his shoulders and he turned his head away, staring down at the ground. “I just… realized something.”

“Mn?”

“It’s nothing!” Shen Yuan protested.

With a softened smile, Luo Binghe drifted towards the two of them. He leaned against the counter beside his shizun and watched him with a warm smile. “If it is nothing, then there is no problem with Shizun sharing. We’re listening.”

Shen Yuan cringed. He glanced up for a second, looking between the two of them. Stubbornly, for a solid minute, he stayed silent with his lips sealed. Neither Luo Binghe or Liu Qingge moved. He caved thirty seconds after that with an exasperated breath, and he waved them both off, “It’s *nothing!* I… I just… I realized that…” He swallowed, skin only turning redder by the second. “I… I missed…”

I missed you, his shizun was trying to say.

“It’s just nice!” Shen Yuan sputtered. He broke away from the two of them, waving them off. “That’s all!”

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe whispered, awed.

Liu Qingge, in a moment of brazenous, caught Shen Yuan and folded him into his arms. He had to bend a bit to rest his cheek on Shen Yuan’s head. When he did, he murmured, “Yes.”

“We missed A-Yuan, too,” Luo Binghe added, because neither of the other two were able to.

Shen Yuan made an embarrassed sound. He hid his face.

Smiling, Luo Binghe joined the embrace. He felt so whole and happy. Both of his beloved were in his arms.

Everything was (almost) perfect.

Chapter End Notes

LQG, extremely sleep deprived: I wonder why they were calling him "Lord Luo."
LQG: Oh well, I'm too ~~horny~~ tired to care about that right now. It's probably not

important.

Also, LQG... usually someone waits for the other person to *answer* the knock, before just barging right in....

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

4.3k which can be a 20 min ish reading time!

Happy Friend's Day! Happy Valentine's Day - Happy random February 14th, whatever you celebrate! If I had realized a while ago that I'd be posting an update on February 14th... I would have been smarter about it. We would be at chapter 34, not 31... heheheheehe....

No particular reason for ch 34.... :)

Thank you everyone for the well wishes! My health is still... quite not great. I appreciate those of you telling to take care of myself! I promise I am not pushing myself too hard. <3

CW: Somewhat some homophobia? It's Shen Yuan. You know. He's an oblivious gay who is in denial... the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Something had changed. Shen Yuan could not put his finger on exactly *what* had changed. Either it had something to do with the fact that he had made quite the fool of himself the night before, or something had happened between the other two when they were alone. It wasn't a bad thing; they were in another's space more and shared more small looks. More often than not, Shen Yuan caught Luo Binghe drifting in close to his shishu, with a daring and intimate caress.

The oddest fact about it was that Liu Qingge hardly seemed surprised by all the touch. He even *leaned* into it. Luo Binghe had always been a sticky and clingy disciple, though all of that attention usually was reserved for Shen Yuan only.

The fact that Luo Binghe had someone else should make him jealous, shouldn't it? On the contrary, he was happy. It was heart-warming to see the quiet way Liu Qingge smiled at something the other man said. And even more sweet to see the way Luo Binghe blossomed underneath his shishu's praise.

Shen Yuan's heart was swollen inside his chest, and thinking about the two of them made it squish against his ribs. He couldn't decide if the feeling was uncomfortable or not. He frowned down at the steaming cup in his hands. There was a strange tangle of thoughts and

feelings swarming around his insides. None of which he wanted to digest or look at, because the moment he did it would be crossing a threshold of no return.

There were some things he *didn't* need to know about himself. Please, and thank you!

Things were fine as they were, weren't they?

"Yuan?"

Shen Yuan glanced up. On the side closest to him, Liu Qingge lounged on the couch. He considered him with piercing eyes, dissecting him with every passing second. "Qingge," he answered with a smile, trying to swallow his nerves.

"We need to talk," Liu Qingge said, his expression heavy.

"Mn." Luo Binghe, rather than taking the other part of the couch, sat on the ground beside Shen Yuan. He rested his chin on the arm of the chair, dark eyes glittering in the soft lights of the apartment.

Shen Yuan did not squirm, as close as he was to it. His lips pressed into a thin line, and he held tighter onto his cup. *Mercy,* he begged inwardly, knowing that he would *not* get it. *Mercy please.* He decided to take hold of the conversation, in a bare hope that they can skirt around discussing any *feelings*. "...first things first, we need a plan on what to do when we're back. I'm thinking about our bodies — there's a high possibility if anyone finds us, that they will keep us together. Or at least, relatively close to another."

"There was someone there," Liu Qingge said with a frown.

"What?" Luo Binghe blurted.

"Right before…" The war god's face twisted in displeasure as he tried to figure out how to describe them *hopping worlds.*

"Right before the System launched us back here?" Shen Yuan filled in with a smile.

A dark expression passed over Luo Binghe's face.

Ah! His poor disciple. Still guilting himself over that first initial mishap? Shen Yuan reached out and patted his head. *There, there,* he thought with a smile. *We move on from mistakes, Binghe! This master is just as much, if not more, to blame!*

Liu Qingge made a noise of agreement. "In the forest. They followed us."

"You couldn't make out any details?" Shen Yuan asked.

His shidi shook his head, annoyed.

"Well…" Shen Yuan sipped his tea and stewed in thought. "Out of the three of us, Binghe won't be affected by the System's drain. He will just have to act fast. Ah… at the very least, he'll be able to find me relatively quickly. Though, again, I can not imagine that they would

capture only one of us and not the other two. Though in that case, if they only took either Luo Binghe or me, Liu-shidi would be returned to Cang Qiong Mountain." He glanced over at Luo Binghe. "You didn't happen to give your shishu any of your blood, did you?"

Luo Binghe flushed in a rare show of shame, and he shook his head.

"What." The war god stared at the two of them, face flat.

"Heavenly demon's blood…" Shen Yuan started, then stopped. He had failed to think of the consequences of this thread of conversation. His voice trickled away and he glanced down at his disciple, who now looked very ashamed.

Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes. "*What."*

"This… disciple…" Luo Binghe started, his eyes watering, "...acted very rashly and-"

"Binghe," Shen Yuan said, reaching out to pat his head. "That's all behind us, mn? And now that your blood parasites are in Shen Qingqiu's body, you'll be able to locate me just fine!"

A strange sound escaped Liu Qingge. He slammed his fist against the couch. "Explain!"

Shen Yuan exchanged a glance with his disciple, to see if he would rather explain it in his own words. With his head ducked, his little sheep seemed unlikely to want to say much at all. "Well…" Shen Yuan continued, "A heavenly demon's blood has parasites that are then connected to said heavenly demon. The parasites have many properties, one of which… gives the heavenly demon the ability to… sense where they are. At any point in time."

Apparently there was a *slight* line to Liu Qingge's ambivalence towards Luo Binghe's demonic heritage, because he looked distinctly uncomfortable. "How…"

Ah. His shidi wanted to know how Shen Yuan got infected. *Well…* "It doesn't *matter,"* Shen Yuan said, waving his hand. His skin heated as he remembered that moment, being pinned against the wall with Luo Binghe's leg thrust between his own-

Nope!

Bad thoughts!

We are NOT going there! Thank you!

"When this beast ran into Shizun in Jin Lan City," Luo Binghe murmured, pouting. "He-"

Liu Qingge swooped over the arm of the couch and caught Luo Binghe's chin between his fingers. He forced his head up to meet his gaze, and he sternly said, "Do not call yourself a beast."

"Sh-Shishu," Luo Binghe stammered in his shock.

Shen Yuan was quite surprised himself.

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge said, his eyes narrowed. “You are not a beast.”

A surprised breath slipped in through Luo Binghe’s parted lips. He stared up at his shishu, eyes wide and watery.

“Yuan is right. Doesn’t matter how.” Liu Qingge relaxed back into his seat, letting go. He attempted to appear more casual as he asked, “What else… does your blood do?”

Look at you go, Shidi! Showing interest so that Binghe isn’t ashamed!!

Unfortunately, it seemed as if their local heavenly demon didn’t *want* to talk about it more.

After a few moments of extended silence, Shen Yuan stepped in. “It heals,” he said, not needing to fake any enthusiasm. He was quite intrigued by the unique properties of heavenly demons, at least when said heavenly demon wasn’t trying to torture or kill him. “It’s actually quite interesting, and I would love to study it someday… Only the smallest bit is required before an individual is infected! The parasites somehow multiply within the infected’s body, and from there they’re fully integrated throughout the circulatory system of the-” He stopped, and trailed off as he realized how uneasy his shidi looked. “They’re… harmless…?” he continued. *Mostly.* Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced down at his disciple. *As long as the protagonist wills them to be.*

Luo Binghe somehow managed to *immediately* understand that look, and he gave him a pleading glance, as if to say, *This disciple would never!* With a heavy sigh, he turned towards his shishu and confessed, “The… *parasites* can also allow me to… harm or control any… *infected.”*

Ah! Look at you go, Shen Yuan cheered inwardly, *Not concealing anything else from your shishu, eh?*

Liu Qingge, after wrestling control of his face, appeared thoughtful. He turned to Shen Yuan. “Would it help… you?”

“It didn’t appear to be able to repair any damage that the System was doing,” Shen Yuan said as he considered that line of thought.

“...the parasites were healing Shizun,” Luo Binghe said with a pout. “They just couldn’t repair *faster* than what the System was doing.”

“Ah…” Shen Yuan said, and he smiled placatingly at his disciple.

“No,” Liu Qingge said, shaking his head. “Would it help you…” He waved a hand towards him.

Shen Yuan stared at him. “O-Oh.” His shishu was asking if the parasites could help his *current* body. He honestly was not sure. Plenty of Binghe’s wives had had ailments that could be solved by either the heavenly pillar or his blood parasites. Option one-

Well.

Option one was already in queue in the other world!

No need to think about that!

“This Binghe is human here,” Luo Binghe reminded both of them, regretfully.

“And as of right now, our only way back and forth between the worlds is the System. Though, I do wonder, could Xin Mo…?” Shen Yuan wondered aloud, curiously. “It is the protagonist’s golden finger.”

Liu Qingge deadpanned. “What.”

“It’s extremely powerful,” Shen Yuan explained, “with some drawbacks. But either way, once we’re back in the other world… *this* won’t matter.” He motioned to himself.

Exasperated, Liu Qingge sighed.

Oh, shidi… Taking drama classes from our local expert, Maiden Luo? Ah! Now you just need to bring yourself to tears…

The image of Liu Qingge with teary eyes was… a little too powerful. Shen Yuan completely lost his train of thought.

“It’s the sword this one had in the Bamboo House,” Luo Binghe explained, quietly. “The one that… helped cause my qi deviation. It also allowed me to escape the Abyss. I can use it to… move great distances in as little as a step.”

Some of the confusion cleared. The war god nodded, and his eyes lifted back up to study Shen Yuan. After a moment, he gently probed, “Yuan. Your family.”

There was a thin veil control tucked around Shen Yuan. That unspoken question punctured it. He turned his head aside and stared down into the cup in his hands. His throat tightened to the point he couldn’t speak.

“Yuan-gege,” Luo Binghe said, shifting closer to the chair. He reached out for one of his hands, and wrapped it up in a gentle grip. “If this disciple can help Shizun, he will do anything for him.”

Shen Yuan tried to thank him. His mouth moved, but his voice was nothing but a scraping sound. Embarrassed, he cleared his throat and smiled, “They’ve been waiting for me to die for years. It’s fine, Binghe. We just need to focus on getting you two back home. Ah… stop worrying over this master so much, would you?”

When he reached out a hand to pat his disciple’s head, Luo Binghe intercepted it. His eyes saddened. “Shizun…”

“Yuan,” Liu Qingge added, worried.

“Stop,” Shen Yuan told them with a laugh. It did not cover up how thick his voice had gotten. “It’s fine-”

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe pressed. He slid to kneel in front of Shen Yuan, stealing the cup of tea to set it aside. He captured both of Shen Yuan’s hands and held them securely between his warm palms. “You can miss them.”

“Stop.” Shen Yuan closed his eyes, this time his voice was sharp. “Stop. Just. No more.” He couldn’t let himself think about it. It was one thing to accept he would never see any of them ever again. It was another to leave them like *this.* Without answers. Thinking he holed himself away like a dying cat. Would the last he ever saw of his sister be her running away from him, crying?

That thought hurt more than anything.

So, he *couldn’t* think.

Not now.

Added weight made the chair creak, and an arm draped around his shoulders. Liu Qingge softly said, “A-Yuan.”

Fucking ‘A-Yuan.’ Were these two trying to make him start sobbing like a child!? (Again.) “*Please,”* Shen Yuan whispered. “Not now.”

Liu Qingge squeezed his shoulder. “...fine.”

Letting out a breath of relief, Shen Yuan took a few moments to pull himself back together. He blinked until his eyes cleared, and then took a deep breath and said, “Let’s figure out what to do with the mess I caused, mn?”

Liu Qingge stayed as he was, sitting on the arm of the chair with his arm heavy over Shen Yuan’s shoulders. He shook his head.

“What do you mean ‘no?’” Shen Yuan asked, smiling at him. He tried ignoring the way his heart knocked around. Both his shidi and disciple were close to him again, crowding around him. He ignored the quiet whisper in the back of his head, telling him how comfortable it would be to lay in their arms-

Stop.

Mouth dry, Shen Yuan continued, “Does that mean you agree with my ingenious plan of turning the sect world against me?”

Face falling flat, Liu Qingge reached up and flicked his forehead. “No.”

With a wince, Shen Yuan clapped a hand over the spot he flicked. “Then what do you mean ‘no?’”

“Zhangmen-shixiong will figure it out,” he answered, confidently.

Both Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe exchanged a glance. There was a lot that the sect leader had been able to swing to his advantage in the past, and a lot more that he ignored in favor of the

original goods. But… he wasn't sure that extended to *heavenly demons.*

To expect Yue Qingyuan to be able to clean up that *entire* mess…

"As a back-up plan," Luo Binghe said, clearly thinking along the same lines as his shizun, "this Binghe can protect both Shizun and Shishu in the demonic realm."

"That must mean," Shen Yuan said, impressed, "you claimed the palace."

"*Palace?"* Liu Qingge asked, voice strained. His face twisted as if he couldn't decide whether or not he would regret asking.

"Binghe is… or on his way to becoming the emperor of the demonic realm," Shen Yuan said, and he couldn't help the burst of pride that flooded his voice as he said it.

Eyes widened, Liu Qingge's face froze.

"...Shishu…?" Luo Binghe asked.

In disbelief, the war god looked between both of them. The expression on his face very clearly said, *Are you serious? This kid?? Are you sure? Are you sure that you're sure?*

Without waiting for an answer, Liu Qingge shot up from the chair and began pacing. He rubbed his hands over his face, turned a look towards the heavens, and circuited the entire room. He continuously shook his head in blatant disbelief. At some point, he waved away their unspoken concern with a hand. After a few laps, he came to a stop in front of the sliding glass door to stare out into the horizon.

Sensing that his shidi needed a bit of time, Shen Yuan directed some questions at his disciple. "Has Binghe become emperor?"

"Shizun knows so much," Luo Binghe said with a smile. "This one has claimed the throne, yes. But I am still a length away from uniting the demonic realm." He leaned in, resting an arm over Shen Yuan's knees so he could rest his head on it. Then he told Shen Yuan all that he had accomplished so far in the realms.

It… really was impressive. Luo Binghe had crawled out of the Abyss and immediately set upon the world. In as little as six months, not only had he managed to infiltrate Huan Hua Palace, but he had claimed his birthright and earned the loyalty of his right-hand man, Mobei-Jun!

Shen Yuan gushed his praise, patting his disciple's head all the while. He couldn't help it! And how was he supposed to feel any shame, especially with Luo Binghe looking at him like that?! His disciple's eyes glittered with happiness, squished into pleased little crescents. Ah! And his hair was so fluffy and soft… "This master is pleased," he said, needlessly. "As expected of my Binghe!"

A happy sound rumbled from Luo Binghe. He leaned into the head pats, content to stay right there.

Breaking away from the window, Liu Qingge returned to stand beside them. He crossed his arms and stared down the (adorable) mighty demon. “Emperor? You?”

Luo Binghe straightened, and instead of taking any offense, he valiantly declared, “It was always this disciple’s intention to prove to Shizun that he was worthy enough to stand by his side! Now this disciple wants to be equal to both his shishu and shizun, and to earn his place beside them!”

Steel eyes softening, Liu Qingge had the echo of a smile on his lips. “Mn.” He reached down and patted the demon emperor’s head as well. “Well done.”

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe murmured, leaning into the touch. His eyes glittered with tears.

Liu Qingge raised his eyebrow. He did not say anything, but it was clear from his expression that he was having a hard time believing that this teary-eyed sticky little sheep was an *emperor.* With a slight shake of his head, he decided not to comment. He changed the topic and said, “Zhangmen-shixiong will not fail.” He took the time to look each of them in the eye. “...but should things go *wrong,* I trust Binghe.”

That… was quite a bit coming from the war god, living nightmare for all demonkind. Shen Yuan stared at him, surprised. “Ah… well, at the very least, it will buy us some time to figure out what to do next. It won’t look good, us absconding to the demonic realm. It will only fuel the rumors…”

“Then we can wait for Sect Leader Yue to end the rumors,” Liu Qingge said, full of stubborn faith in their sect leader.

“Aiyah…” Shen Yuan said with half a smile. “If you weren’t a man yourself, I’d think you’re in love with Zhangmen-shixiong, Qingge!”

Liu Qingge’s face twisted in an expression of abhorrent distaste.

As expected of our asexual war god!

On the ground, Luo Binghe looked as if he ate something sour while also trying to stop himself from laughing.

“No,” his shidi denied, sharply.

“It’s a joke, it’s a joke!” Shen Yuan said, waving a hand at him. “Well, we have a plan in place. Survive until Luo Binghe finds us, and then… should the sect leader fail in corralling the entire cultivation world, we will take refuge within the demonic realm until tempers have calmed down. I suppose now we just have to wait until we’re pulled back into the other world…” He tapped his chin in thought.

“Why… because I am a man?”

Shen Yuan blinked up at his shidi, confused by the question. “For what?”

“Why can’t Liu-shishu be a man *and* love Yue Qingyuan?” Luo Binghe asked. His shishu lightly clapped him on the back of the head and murmured something about respect. Though Luo Binghe pouted and looked apologetic, he didn’t correct himself.

“Because…” Shen Yuan started to speak. Heat rose to his face and he stammered, “B-Because…” He ran his hands through his hair, still startled at the length of it. “Then they would both be men.”

The other two exchanged a glance. Liu Qingge cocked his head to the side, single eyebrow raising. “So?”

“It’s…” Shen Yuan never thought that he would have to explain this. His mouth opened and shut a few times. Then it dawned on him. Why *did* he have to explain it? “You two… seem to think… otherwise?”

Luo Binghe had a calculating look in his eyes. It was the same look he had when he was finally picking up all the little clues of a particular problem and knitting them all together. “Yuan-gege, are men in your world not allowed to love other men?”

Uncertain why he was embarrassed, Shen Yuan said, “It’s… disallowed in some places. Frowned upon in others…” He could practically see the glow of his own blush.

“...would… Shizun think less of this disciple… if he were to love men?” Luo Binghe probed, gently.

“That’s-” Shen Yuan was about to blurt out *“impossible,”* and quickly decided against it. “Binghe! I will *always* accept you, no matter what! If Binghe wishes to court men, you can! It’s just…” He rubbed the back of his neck. The Luo Binghe in the book certainly had *no* interest in men! Well… not the type of interests that nurtured romance. More of the limb-ripping type!

Luo Binghe’s expression flattened, unamused. “The book.”

“This master *knows* Binghe has a big heart!” Shen Yuan continued, placating him with a smile. “No matter who Binghe brings into his life, this master will be pleased! Just… maybe, Binghe should think about… happiness. Not… quantity.”

His disciple had never looked more betrayed.

“...hm,” Liu Qingge shifted on his feet. “How many?”

“What?” Shen Yuan asked, while Luo Binghe whined, “*Shishu…”*

“By the end of the book,” Liu Qingge asked, now looking wickedly amused. “How many wives?”

“...hundreds,” Shen Yuan answered, with a wince.

Luo Binghe choked.

Snorting, Liu Qingge nodded. “Mn.”

“*No!”* Luo Binghe cried, appalled. “No! That’s *not-”* He huffed in frustration. “Shizun!”

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan reached out and took his hands. “Once we’re out of this mess, Binghe will have the *whole* world to explore! You’ll come across many… interesting sights! New places, new items, a-and… and lots of-“

“Papapa,” Liu Qingge added.

Shen Yuan twisted to look at the war god so fast he thought he pulled a muscle. His eyes widened. There was undeniable mirth twinkling in his shidi’s eyes as he looked down at the both of them. Shen Yuan gaped. Who the *fuck* taught Liu Qingge “papapa?”

Dangerous! *Too dangerous!!*

“Shishu!” Luo Binghe wailed, embarrassed. “Shishu! No!”

Liu Qingge smirked ruthlessly as he dodged away from a swipe from the affronted half-demon. “Your shizun and shishu will always support you,” he drawled, dryly. He glanced up at Shen Yuan with a raised eyebrow.

That… *had* been what Shen Yuan was about to say. Without mentioning the *papapa!* “Qingge,” he said, almost breathlessly. Hearing that beautiful and ethereal man say “papapa” was not on his bingo card! It would *never* be on his bingo card!! What the fuck!!!

“Shishu!”

The most shocking of it all was that… Liu Qingge was *teasing* them. Both of them. Shen Yuan saw it in the way his shidi’s lip curled, and how he goaded Luo Binghe with a raised eyebrow.

Shen Yuan found warmth bubbling in his chest, outside of his embarrassment, and he was smiling. He laughed behind his hand and said, “Shidi. *Never* say that again.”

“Mn?” Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow, a slight blush ghosting his cheeks.

“*Qingge!”* Shen Yuan laughed. “You know what I am trying to say!*”*

The war god shrugged. He leaned in, hand resting against the arm of the chair, looking far too smug. He was close enough that his hair fell forward and brushed Shen Yuan’s shoulders. In a low voice and with a raised eyebrow, he demanded, “Explain.”

If…

If Shen Yuan was *anyone* else, it would look like the war god was *flirting* with him. But… that was impossible. Not Liu Qingge. Not *with* Shen Yuan!

It was… too much! *Dangerous!! Way too dangerous!* Shen Yuan fell back and both of his hands covered his face. He laughed, embarrassed, and he cried out, “Qingge!”

“Mn?” Liu Qingge asked, drawing even closer.

Shen Yuan peaked between his fingers. He… should not be feeling this way. His heartbeat ran fast, quickening at an alarming rate. His stomach was tugging with little delightful bursts of… *some* emotion.

His shidi was too close, lips pulled into a teasing smirk. “Say *what* again?”

Breath catching, Shen Yuan stared at his lips. His own tingled. He was shocked at the crashing sensation of *need* that slammed into him. He *needed* to kiss-

No. Shen Yuan closed his eyes and completely covered his face. *Stop. It’s not like that. Stop it.*

“Pa… pa… pa?”

There was *no way* Liu Qingge said it *twice. Twice!!* An undignified sound left Shen Yuan. He was pretending he did *not* just make that sound.

The war god *laughed.*

It started off as a snort that turned into a breathy, delicate chuckle. The heat of his breath washed over Shen Yuan’s hands. He was feeling things in all sorts of places that he *shouldn’t* be. He knew if he peeked through his fingers again, he might do something that he would regret.

“Qingge!” Shen Yuan scorned. His voice did *not* just crack! It absolutely did not! (It did.) “That’s it!” He lifted one of his hands just so he could meet eyes with his disciple. “Binghe?” He pointed at Liu QIngge. “Save your shizun from your incorrigible shishu!”

Luo Binghe laughed. It was a wonderful sound, filling Shen Yuan with indescribable joy. His disciple seemed so *pleased* to be pulled into this… game. He cried out valiantly, “Yes, Shizun!”

The half-demon’s expression sharpened. With a devious little smirk, he launched off the floor.

Liu Qingge’s eyes widened. He side-stepped two swipes and retreated from the chair. There was a little quirk to his lips, giving away how much he enjoyed their little game. He made it two steps behind the couch before Luo Binghe threw himself over it, and the two disappeared with a muffled thump. There was a hidden scuffle, accented with grunts.

In a few moments, Luo Binghe was laughing. “I caught him, Shizun!”

Laughing softly to himself, Shen Yuan said, “Good. Very good. Teach your shishu a lesson for me.” He pressed a hand over his heart, smile straining. The two of them had to stop doting on him and playing around like this. None of them could afford the moment Shen Yuan did something stupid because…

Because *apparently*...

He fell back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling of his apartment.

Apparently, Shen Yuan was gay.

Chapter End Notes

It's really fun to have an LQG who hasn't built up that deep-seated rivalry with LBH - one who doesn't know LBH as the unruly disciple who became an emperor and then absconded with SQQ's dead body.

This version of them is interesting to write because they didn't necessarily have a chance to build up that five-year-long aggression towards another. LQG hasn't really seen the "violent" side of LBH. He's only seen this... wet and pathetic (I say this lovingly) version of LBH.

So what do you *mean* he's the demon emperor!?

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For any intrigued on any updates, I have started writing Shang Qinghua's POV - this little version of the story is going to be short and no where near as long as this. I don't know if I will wait to post it until after this is finished, or... what. We will see.

Thank you everyone for your support! I promise, I am making my way through comments!

We're getting closer and closer to the end!

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

6k words, 25 ish minutes reading time

Content Warning: Medical discussions, DNR, talk of death,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Shizun, can I borrow your phone?"

Shen Yuan did not think anything of it. He barely had the thing back in his hands, and hadn't really needed to use it. Now he had his laptop on the coffee table, leaning over as he tried to remember how to use a computer.

It was one of those things that doesn't *really* leave you, especially after having used one for most of his mortal life. But he did feel a little rusty using the track pad, and remembering the short cuts. He unlocked his phone and handed it over, frowning down at the computer screen. A few hours had passed since he came home, and now Liu Qingge was working through some exercises in the corner and Luo Binghe was stretched out on the couch beside him.

They had spent some time after the "papapa" incident to resolve all contingency plans on what to do when they returned to PIDW. The only problem was waiting to return. Until then… Shen Yuan figured that there was no real reason why he couldn't show off the modern realm to his-

To Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge.

"What if we go to a movie?" Shen Yuan asked, scrolling through showtimes of a nearby movie theater. "We also should make our way to a market again. I think Binghe really enjoyed that."

"Mn," Liu Qingge answered.

Shen Yuan considered his shidi, eyes drifting towards him as he drew into a low lunge. He doubted that Liu Qingge would really enjoy sitting through a long movie at the movie theater. It was an *experience,* but an idle one. He might enjoy it more if they were at home. His shidi always seemed to be moving. The longest he ever sat still was either to clear up Shen Qingqiu's meridians or at a peak lord meeting. Even then there was always the distinct sensation of building pressure, like the war god might suddenly pop up and burst into motion.

As Liu Qingge switched legs and sank down, the light fabric of his pants stretched taut and clung to his skin. When he wore his robes, it was hard to see how really *muscular* he was. It was a *lot* easier to see now. His shishu had a cut, lean figure. One that promised lithe agility. Powerful legs, strong shoulders… Even the light sweatshirt showed off more than layers of robes. It wrapped his biceps, accentuating the hours of training he threw himself into.

The war god rose out of his lunge and threw Shen Yuan a glance.

Ah. Wait. He was staring, wasn't he? "T-There's a gym connected to the building," Shen Yuan told him, trying to cover for the fact that he was *staring.* His skin heated. *Sorry, Shidi! This shixiong isn't leering!*

(Probably.)

Was… Shen Yuan leering?

Oh, no.

His heartbeat clattered like someone abusing a string on a guqin.

"Gay," Luo Binghe said aloud.

Shen Yuan stopped breathing. He snapped his attention to his disciple, who lay with his head resting against Shen Yuan's thigh. He held the phone out, squinting at the screen as he scrolled down.

"That's what your world calls it? When men like men?" Luo Binghe asked.

Holy shit. Shen Yuan could have choked on his lungs. His disciple was *looking up* the word "gay" on his phone!

"Boyfriends…" Luo Binghe murmured under his breath.

Shen Yuan snatched his phone back as fast as lightning. "B-Binghe!"

Startled, Luo Binghe looked up at him. He was the picture of innocence, large, doe-like eyes. "Shizun…?"

"D-Don't-" Shen Yuan was mortified when his voice came out closer to a squeak. "Don't look up those things!"

"...this disciple was merely learning," Luo Binghe grumbled. He rolled on the couch and pushed himself up, kneeling beside Shen Yuan. His curly hair spilled over his shoulders, and he looked at him with half-lidded eyes. "Isn't that what Shizun taught this disciple…? To research things he does not understand."

Shen Yuan regretted every single life choice that brought him here. Why did he ever think it was a good idea to *show* the protagonist how to *look things up* on the internet!! He held the confiscated phone to his chest and shrank away from the demon emperor's looming presence. "Binghe! This master… I never told you to look up *inappropriate* things!"

Across the room, Liu Qingge snorted.

“How is love inappropriate?” Luo Binghe asked, leaning in closer. “Maybe if this disciple can’t look it up, he should ask his shizun for a lesson…” His hand rested on Shen Yuan’s thigh — probably to keep his balance.

Shen Yuan’s mouth dried.

“What’s a ‘boyfriend,’ Shizun?” Luo Binghe asked, fingers pressing into his leg.

Oh. Oh no. Heat scoured through Shen Yuan, and he was downright *appalled* by how fast his body reacted to Luo Binghe’s touch. It was an innocent thing! His disciple was just trying to ask a question!

A question that Shen Yuan did *not* want to answer. It was too embarrassing! Which was worse, he wondered? Giving Luo Binghe free range on his phone, or having to explain the concept himself?

Shen Yuan thought of all the horrifying things that existed on the internet, all the *inappropriate things* his disciple could run across, and he decided it best if he controlled the situation. Clearing his throat, he used his phone to push Luo Binghe back.

His disciple pouted. He acquiesced and sat back on his heels, his hand thankfully leaving Shen Yuan’s thigh.

None of that, please and thank you! This old man does NOT want to think about those things, please!

“A… boyfriend,” Shen Yuan said, stiffly, “is a word that someone uses to describe…” He tried to think of it in terms the other two would understand. “Well, let’s say that Luo Binghe was to court someone. After he’s established a relationship with that person, then he would be their boyfriend.”

“So, Yuan-gege’s family thinks that we’re courting him?” Luo Binghe asked, as innocent as ever with his head cocked to the side.

“And the nurses,” Liu Qingge added.

Shen Yuan clamped a hand over his face and rubbed his eyes. *Fuck!* That was embarrassing! Clearing his throat, he schooled his expression into something more worthy of a peak lord and said, “They’re misunderstanding the situation… Apologizing on their behalf to Binghe and Liu-shidi.” He decidedly ignored how much he was blushing, and how his heart wanted to leap out of his chest.

The two exchanged a glance.

What.

Why?

“Is… Yuan-gege gay?” Luo Binghe asked, lightly.

Shen Yuan stiffened. His grip on his phone tightened and he wished it was a fan so he could hide behind it. He wished his disciple had asked this two days ago so he could confidently say, “No, Binghe. I’m as straight as straight can be!”

But he couldn’t. Not any longer.

He ended up not saying anything.

This was… unfair. This topic of this conversation was one that he had planned to lock away forever. Why did it have to come up *now?*

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe continued, “I think I’m gay.”

The phone slipped from Shen Yuan’s fingers. He gaped. “That’s-“ Impossible. It was impossible. Luo Binghe, stallion protagonist, future papapa connoisseur, *gay?!* The man had *hundreds* of wives! Very pleased wives, if the awful sex scenes had anything to show for! But *gay?!*

Shen Yuan stared. Had he… bent the protagonist somehow?! At what point-

“Yuan,” Liu Qingge said as he came over to sit on the coffee table. “Binghe… isn’t the one from your book. He’s his own person.”

Mouth closing with a *click,* Shen Yuan dropped his eyes and stared into his lap. Shame rushed to heat his cheeks. That was the crux of the issue, wasn’t it? Somewhere down the line, things got a little skewed. The Luo Binghe that sat in front of him, watching him with dark and desperate eyes, was (mostly) *nothing* like the original. They were in uncharted territory now and way off track of the plot. Considering, of course, that they were currently… *here*. “I’m sorry, Binghe.” When he glanced back up, he smiled. “Qingge is right. You’re your own person. This master accepts you no matter what.” He reached up and held Luo Binghe’s face in his hands. “I’ll always be proud of you.”

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe breathed out his name, tears glittering in his eyes.

That’s when Shen Yuan saw Liu Qingge holding Luo Binghe’s hand.

Ah.

Wait.

Shen Yuan looked at their hands, then up at Liu Qingge. A beautiful, magnificent man with strong eyebrows, a sharp jaw, and enchanting steel-grey eyes. That man could turn anyone gay…!

Oh. Maybe *that’s* what was happening!!! It was *Liu Qingge* that was changing everything! The war god had died in the original story, yet Shen Yuan had saved his life, which meant that he was alive!! Free to turn men gay left and right! *Including* the protagonist.

It wasn't too wild of a theory, considering that the original Luo Binghe ended up marrying Liu Qingge's sister. And..

And now they… were gay for… another?

That wasn't too out of scope either, considering how incredibly handsome Luo Binghe was! His disciple was no longer the chubby-cheeked white lotus that he once knew, but an emperor who was on his way to ruling all of the demon realm *and* eventually the human realm. Of course *the protagonist,* stallion number one, could make a man curious…!

Maybe Shen Yuan *wasn't* gay. He was just surrounded by these perfect, masculine specimens. *Anyone* would bend for them!

That was it!

Shen Yuan, having resolutely come to this epiphany, slammed a fist into the palm of his hand. "I get it," he said, flashing both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe a wide smile. Who better to look after his disciple than the War God of Bai Zhan?! What an *incredible* couple! An unstoppable force!! "Yes, yes! This will do. This will do perfectly fine." He reached out and patted their hands.

Ahh… what an excellent addition to Luo Binghe's future harem! Hopefully the war god could help keep the protagonist in line… and help him choose with his heart and not with his… *heavenly pillar.*

"…Shizun…?" Luo Binghe asked, warily.

"What did I say, hm?" Shen Yuan said, raising an eyebrow. "I will accept you no matter what!" Inwardly, he held a metaphorical thumbs-up to his disciple. *Nice one, Binghe!! This master will keep cheering you on!*

For some reason, both his disciple and his shidi exchanged *another* glance. This once almost looked… aggrieved.

Huh. That was odd.

Shen Yuan had decided they needed to celebrate. While his disciple slaved away in the kitchen to prepare them dinner, he leaned against the island counter and ordered some celebratory cakes and sweets. Only the best! He smiled down at his phone, perhaps adding one too many treats to his cart. He reasoned that he had to account for *everyone's* tastes, not just his own. That meant something more savory for Liu Qingge, since the man didn't seem to really enjoy sugary things…

As he leaned against the counter, choosing between options, a body joined him. He hardly had to glance over to recognize the looming presence of his stern shidi. "Say Qingge," he

started to say, “is it that you don’t like it at all… or only sometimes?”

“Wh-what?”

Shen Yuan glanced up. The two of them were close. It really was unfair that these two were so tall. Even leaning against the counter, Shen Yuan was the perfect height to smother his face in Liu Qingge’s chest.

Don’t think about that…! He’s taken!!

Using his phone to shield the lower half of his face, Shen Yuan forced his eyes off Liu Qingge’s chest and glanced up at his face.

The war god was staring at him with a bewildered and embarrassed expression.

“Is my shidi too embarrassed to admit he has a sweet tooth?” Shen Yuan teased.

Liu Qingge’s expression folded, and he frowned. “What.”

Smiling, Shen Yuan turned the phone screen towards him. “I was ordering some celebratory snacks.”

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe cried, scandalized. He pouted over his shoulder, wearing the expression of a betrayed maiden.

“*Treats,”* Shen Yuan amended as he sidled closer to Liu Qingge. “For tonight! I’m thinking we can watch a movie.” A movie was the perfect cuddle-date! Shen Yuan could sit on the chair while the other two shared the couch, then he would fake a yawn and sneak into his bedroom so the two could be alone. It was the perfect plan.

This master is rooting for you, Binghe!!

“What are we celebrating?” Liu Qingge asked. He stepped closer, so close that his body heat radiated into Shen Yuan. Instead of taking the phone from him, his shidi laid his hand over his and glided his thumb over the screen. Their fingers overlapped.

Shen Yuan could not think past the resounding thuds of his heart.

Shidi. Shidi!!!! Hello?! This is a move to pull on Binghe!!! Not this old man of a shixiong!! Aiyah…

“A-Yuan?” Liu Qingge asked, turning to look at him. His face was colored a light pink. It softened the harshness of his steel eyes. His lips were round and looked soft…

Gulping, Shen Yuan ducked his head and looked away. “U-Uh… just… for…” It felt awkward to say, “Congrats Binghe, you’re gay!” Or even, “Yay, Liu Qingge! You’re now wife number one!”

“…is it like a welcome home celebration?” Luo Binghe asked.

“Yes!” Shen Yuan said, too enthusiastically. “That is… I… am just really glad.” He stared down at the counter. “Glad that… I didn’t come home to an empty apartment.”

Ah… wait. Why did that feel too honest?

His skin prickled with embarrassment.

An arm wrapped around his shoulders and squeezed him tight. Liu Qingge drifted in closer, the heat of his breath stirring Shen Yuan’s hair and tickling his ear. He said, “A-Yuan chose well.”

“Ah, ha…” Shen Yuan squirmed away and held up the phone in front of his face again. “Then I’ll order!”

Powerful!! Qingge is too powerful!

His heart thundered as he turned his attention back to the screen. With a few last adjustments, he placed the order and was left staring down at his phone. His heart sank. There were no new notifications. No missed calls – except for an answered one from a strange number. The area code was local…

“You should let her know that you’re home,” Liu Qingge said.

Shen Yuan didn’t have to ask *who.* His sister. Throat tightening, he said, “Probably.” He swiped to open up their messages. His thumbs hovered above the keyboard as he reread their last conversation.

It seemed like it had happened a decade ago.

His sister had been asking him for his opinion on the best can opener, because he always “seemed to know things.” It had ended in a gif war. The corner of his lip quirked. His sister had a terrible picture of him that she made into a gif because she’s an *absolute* menace, and the war had ended with that stupid gif…

Next to his ear, he heard a snort.

Ah, shidi! Don’t you know it’s rude to read over someone’s shoulder?!

Shen Yuan cried inwardly and said goodbye to his dignity. “She created that,” he said, pointing to the gif. “She’s evil. I have one of her, though.” He swiped over to his pictures, and scrolled through them.

It… didn’t take long to scroll. It wasn’t until he was trying to get to the picture, which was a few years old at this point, that he realized that he hadn’t used his camera much lately. Last year he took maybe thirty pictures, and most were of the scenery or strange bugs he came across. There was one of him wearing a new button-up to send to his da-ge to show his thanks.

That was it.

He really *had* stopped trying to live life, hadn't he?

"Here it is," Shen Yuan said, clicking on the image. He held his thumb on it so that it played for a few brief seconds. In the picture, Huiying laughed so hard that strawberry milk spewed from her nose. He smiled. "I can't even remember what we were laughing about. I think we were going to send some pictures to my da-ge because he was being a baby about missing out on the aquarium. Then we started laughing so hard…" His voice trailed off and his throat tightened. "It was her thirteenth birthday. I've never missed one of her birthdays."

Liu Qingge wore a tender expression, a quiet smile tilting the corner of his mouth. "Mn. I try not to miss Mingyan's." He glanced at Shen Yuan. "I want to see more."

"More… pictures?" Shen Yuan guessed.

"Mn," Liu Qingge nodded. He reached and swiped one photo over.

This one featured both Shen Yuan and Huiying. They stood in front of a poster with a shark, both acting afraid of it. In the photo, Shen Yuan had fuller cheeks and was younger. Healthier.

"Oh!" Shen Yuan smiled. "I remember now! My da-ge is afraid of sharks! Specifically, he's really afraid of flying *because* of sharks, so we always make fun of him. He won't even fly if he's not going over the ocean! He's still afraid that somehow the plane will crash and he'll end up in shark infested waters…" he trailed off as he realized Liu Qingge had no idea what a plane or shark was. Excitedly, he reached out and caught the war god's arm. "I know! Tomorrow, let's go to the aquarium!"

Liu Qingge smiled at him.

It was a full blown smile, teeth and all.

"Mn," he agreed.

Shen Yuan didn't breathe.

He lost trace of all his thoughts. He was dazed. Had he ever seen… the war god *smile?*

His fingers on Liu Qingge's arm twitched.

Smile fading, his shidi cocked his head in a silent question. When he didn't get an answer, he probed, "A-Yuan?"

Shen Yuan's heart quaked so fiercely it rumbled in his bones. This… this was a little too much. He snatched back his hand and took a step back, rubbing the back of his neck. He laughed and said something, and fled from the kitchen. He placed a hand over his heart and hid inside his office. The door shut behind him, and he collapsed against it with his hands covering his face.

Forcing himself not to think about it, he slid down the door and buried his face in his arms.

It was better if he didn't think.

He would get over it soon, wouldn't he?

Shen Yuan ended up on the window seat, curled around a large plushie as he stared out into the city. His phone lay in his hand, the glow of the screen taunting him. The chat between his sister and him lay open. He couldn't figure out what to say. It should be simple enough to say, "I'm home now."

It seemed too little after what had happened.

He curled up even tighter, squishing the little plushie. It was fanmade of one of the monsters in PIDW: the Blood-Shelled Harpy Badger. It was a beast that sounded terrifying on paper, and absolutely adorable in plushie form.

His eyes fell shut and he buried his face in the crystalized "spikes". (Just foam in this case. Incredibly soft and comfortable foam.)

There was a knock at the door.

Shen Yuan glanced down at the time and realized that he had been sitting in here for a *while.* His hold on the plushie tightened and he buried his face in it. He knew he should probably get up and tell his shidi and his disciple that he was fine. The message could wait. Maybe after he left the other two, to go to bed alone, he could message her then…

Stop running away. Trust us. Talk to us.

That's what Liu Qingge had said.

"Come in," Shen Yuan said, his voice small and weak.

The door slid open, and Liu Qingge took a cautious step inside. His eyes swept around the room once, before falling onto Shen Yuan. He stayed at the threshold, as if uncertain if he were allowed in.

Before, Shen Yuan had told both of them the room was off limits. It was the one place in his apartment that he allowed himself to be *him.* Which meant... it was personal. (And a little embarrassing.) Posters and art covered the walls, most featuring PIDW. There were a few others from other media he enjoyed, but the bulk happened to be PIDW. Right now, Shen Yuan could get up. He could plaster on a gentle smile, sooth the wrinkle between his shidi's eyebrows with a few words. *I lost track of time. Everything is fine. I will be out in a moment.*

He took in a deep breath and made his decision.

“I… don’t know what to say,” Shen Yuan said, glancing away from the doorway with a smile he didn’t really mean. He stared back out at the city. “I want… to apologize, but I don’t know how.”

He spoke a simple truth. It should be an easy thing. But the words made his pulse pound in the palms of his hands. Why had it been so hard to admit that he was lost? He felt like he had just leaped from a plane with no training on how to work a parachute.

At the doorway, Liu Qingge shifted on his feet. He waited, as if seeing if Shen Yuan would protest, then he stepped inside. He crossed the room in a slow and direct manner, eyes never straying from Shen Yuan. Once he reached the window seat, Shen Yuan moved to make space. The war god settled beside him, their bodies brushing. He observed quietly, letting the silence simmer. After a few quiet moments, he finally asked, “Sorry… is not enough?”

“No,” Shen Yuan said with a small quirk to his lips. “Not after…” *Everything.*

Another shadow blocked the doorway. Luo Binghe cautiously peered inside. Without a word, Shen Yuan patted the space on the other side of him. His disciple smiled, as pleased as he was worried, and he trotted inside. With little to no ceremony, he flopped over both their legs to lay down.

Shen Yuan laughed aloud, shocked by his disciple’s shamelessness.

A wry smile quirked Liu Qingge’s lips, though he made a show of grunting and forcefully adjusting in his seat to make it more comfortable. His eyes softened, and he reached down to secure a hand behind Luo Binghe’s knees so he wouldn’t slide off.

Luo Binghe rested his head on the plushie and stared up at Shen Yuan. The weight of him was grounding. It eased the tremor of Shen Yuan’s errant heart. “I agree with A-Yuan. More needs to be said.”

“I also feel like a text is too cold,” Shen Yuan said. “And I don’t think she will answer if I call… I…” He winced and could not add that he wasn’t *ready* for a conversation. Not one on the phone — at least not yet.

“You have sent small moving pictures,” Liu Qingge pointed out. “Could you send one with sound?”

“Oh.” Shen Yuan thought about it. While he could send a video of himself apologizing, that sounded… weird. Also somewhat impersonal for some reason. “I could just send a voice message.”

“This Binghe would love voice messages from A-Yuan…” Luo Binghe said, softly.

Liu Qingge snorted. “Binghe would be obsessed over *anything* from A-Yuan.”

“You guys,” Shen Yuan protested quietly, flustered. He wasn’t sure what he was protesting, but this type of banter was embarrassing!

Stubbornly, Luo Binghe grumbled, “Ming-gege would be obsessed too..”

Liu Qingge smacked his side.

With a wicked grin, Luo Binghe rolled so he was more on his stomach rather than his side. He wiggled his hips. “Ming-gege missed…”

Face colored with shock, Liu Qingge shouted, “Luo. Bing. He!!!!”

Shen Yuan was confused - mainly because Liu Qingge *obviously* hadn’t missed-

His disciple caught sight of his expression and started laughing.

Sighing, Liu Qingge rubbed a hand over his face. “Shameless!”

There was obviously something Shen Yuan missed. He raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry, Yuan-gege,” Luo Binghe wheezed, reaching up to wipe the corner of his eyes. He didn’t seem all that apologetic.

“Apologize properly,” Liu Qingge grumbled. He cruelly pinched the half-demon’s cheek.

Whining and pouting, Luo Binghe squirmed until his shishu let him go. Then he glanced up at Shen Yuan with large eyes and said, “Apologizing to Shizun…”

“…I am not sure what for,” Shen Yuan admitted.

Liu Qingge turned his cheek to try and smother a snort.

“It’s alright, Yuan-gege,” Luo Binghe said with a smile. “I was just apologizing for playing around when there’s a serious matter to attend to.”

“Mn…” Shen Yuan did not believe that was the *full* reason, but he let it lie as he ran his hand through his disciple’s hair. He paused to gently rub out the red mark left by his shidi’s rough pinch on Luo Binghe’s cheek. His skin was soft and warm. Shen Yuan’s fingers felt cold. He ran his knuckles along Luo Binghe’s cheekbone, and down the side of his face.

His disciple looked up at him, eyes reflecting the lights of the city behind them.

Then Shen Yuan realized what he was doing.

Clearing his throat, he let go of his disciple’s face and turned back to the open chat with his sister. He ignored the way his cheeks heated.

“What all does A-Yuan need to say to his meimei?” Luo Binghe asked.

“…the DNR,” Shen Yuan said. His throat tightened.

His disciple’s breath caught.

“…if I had decided to go that route, that was my choice,” Shen Yuan said, stubbornly. “If I had decided it was what was best.” He swallowed and turned his attention to the window, peering out at the darkening sky. “But I should have talked about it with her to begin with.

With all of them. And… with you two, too." He sighed. "I just… with this entire mess with the System, I didn't think it was an issue. I…"

"It was easier not to think," Liu Qingge filled in.

"Easier not to worry us," Luo Binghe added.

"…I didn't mean to hurt you." Shen Yuan was horrified that his voice shook. He hid his face behind a hand.

Neither of the other two said anything, though Luo Binghe drew his arms around Shen Yuan's waist and snuggled into him. Then Liu Qingge wrapped an arm around Shen Yuan's shoulder and pulled in close, resting his cheek on his head. They gave Shen Yuan some time to gather himself.

Only once Shen Yuan dropped his hand, Luo Binghe gently said, "We forgive you, A-Yuan."

"Mn," Liu Qingge agreed.

"…I am selfish," Luo Binghe said quietly, "and I would never want you to sign anything that would mean your life would end. I don't understand what you've been through or what you're going through, but I would respect your decision. Even if it hurt." Tears filled his eyes and he took in a watery breath. "At least, I think that's the right thing to say, but Shizun, I don't think I really mean it. I don't want you to leave. Ever."

Shen Yuan laughed, and then choked on a surge of emotion. He gently wiped away a few of his disciple's tears. "Thank you for being honest, Binghe. I am not planning on signing a DNR. If I was, I would talk about it. I promise."

His disciple nodded and tried to stop his tears. He failed.

With a soothing hum, Liu Qingge reached over and rubbed a hand over his back.

"Okay." Shen Yuan braced himself with a deep breath. "I think I got it now." He raised the phone to his mouth, closed his eyes, and pressed record. "Meimei, I'm home now." He swallowed. "My… friends are here with me, and they're helping me out. One of them is even cooking me full meals, making sure I actually eat real food. Er-ge dropped me off, and he tried doing his macho-man thing to Binghe, but he's half his size so it was just kind of stupid." He smiled slightly, the slight tilt of a laugh hitting his voice. "But I wouldn't put it past er-ge to have like twelve different contingency plans and fourteen different alibis prepared."

With a heavy sigh, he wiped the corner of his eye and refused to believe it was a tear he wiped away. He swallowed. "I… I don't want to leave things… how we did. It was my fault… for covering everything up and not talking about it. I'm sorry. You're right that I'm a coward, because I was scared…" He stopped talking and turned away from his phone to gather himself. The tip of his nose burned and his breath hiccuped.

Liu Qingge's hold around his shoulders tightened.

Steeling himself, Shen Yuan continued, “I was scared… you would resent me.” He felt two hot tracks trail down his cheeks. His voice wavered. “And I thought it would be better… for you to let me go. But it wasn’t. It was stupid. I was stupid. So, I’m sorry. When you’re ready… let’s hang out. I’ll even watch that one show you like. The one with the demon king and gods or whatever. Whatever you want. I just… want meimei time. And… we can talk.” He cringed and added. “…there’s some things I should tell you, too. But… whenever you’re ready. I’ll be here.”

He let the message end.

The recorded message loaded, and he stared down at it. He wondered if it was too much or too little or…

“Perfect,” Liu Qingge muttered into his hair. “Great job.”

“Ah… Shidi…” Shen Yuan mumbled. “That’s embarrassing to hear you say.”

Luo Binghe grinned. He had cried more during the message, but had managed to stay silent the entire time. He squeezed Shen Yuan. “Shizun did great!”

“Aiyah… you two…” Shen Yuan shook his head with a smile. “Enough of that.”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge said, a glimmer of mischief in his eyes. “For now.”

Shen Yuan groaned. “Mercy, Qingge, mercy…”

A small laugh spilled from Liu Qingge, his dazzling smile breaking apart his usually stern expression. He shook his head. “No.”

“No respect for your shixiong!” Shen Yuan grumbled, though the corner of his lip lifted. He felt a little less awkward.

“Yuan-gege, Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe interrupted, smiling, “are you ready to eat dinner now?”

“Mn.” Liu Qingge extracted his arm from Shen Yuan. Then he shoved Luo Binghe off their laps.

With a startled yelp, his disciple crashed onto the ground. He whined, “Gege!”

“That was for earlier,” Liu Qingge said. Then he stood, using Luo Binghe as a stepping stool. “*That’s* for ‘gege,’ brat.”

Luo Binghe writhed on the ground, whining, “Gege is so cruel!! Shizun! Shizun!! He stepped on me!”

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge left the room.

Laughing behind a hand, Shen Yuan leaned over to peer down at the big baby of a demon emperor. “Is Binghe alright?”

“No!” Luo Binghe pouted, wearing a sorrowful and pleading expression.

Shen Yuan bit back a grin. He leaned down and rubbed his disciple’s head. “Oh, no… poor Binghe. Whatever shall we do…?”

Luo Binghe’s pout broke out into a large grin. He sat up and rested his cheek against Shen Yuan’s knee. “This Binghe would feel a lot better… after a hug.”

“A hug?” Shen Yuan asked, raising his eyebrows. He was a little surprised at the bold request. Though, once he considered how sticky his disciple was… it wasn’t too shocking.

But why wasn’t he asking *Liu Qingge* for a hug…?

Ah. Oh well.

“This-“ Shen Yuan stopped himself from saying, *“This master.”* Saying something like that while Luo Binghe was on the ground with his head on his knee sounded weird. He coughed and said, “How about… a trade.”

“A trade?” Luo Binghe asked, intrigued.

“Mn,” Shen Yuan said with a nod. He knew he had been sitting for too long, crunched up with bad posture. His legs buzzed and his hips creaked. He knew he would have to use the shelves to keep himself steady before he walked to the table. His throat tightened as he grew a little flustered, but he forced himself to plow forward.

Trust us. Talk to us.

“If Binghe helps me up,” he said, shyly looking away, “I’ll give him a hug.”

Luo Binghe’s face sobered. The smile that warmed his face was mature, something so genuine it caught Shen Yuan’s lungs with a barbed hook. “Of course, A-Yuan,” he said, full of tender warmth. He pushed up onto his feet and held out a hand.

With only a second’s worth of hesitation, Shen Yuan took it.

Luo Binghe helped him up onto his feet with endless patience and diligent care. He braced one hand on Shen Yuan’s side, watching him with eyes squished in pure joy. After Shen Yuan finished unfolding himself and was steady on his feet, he instantly found himself captured in a strong pair of arms. He was surrounded by heat and the smell of his own laundry detergent. His disciple cocooned around him, cheek resting atop his head, arms braced behind his back.

It was a strange mirror of the two of them when Luo Binghe was younger, when the boy barely reached Shen Qingqiu’s chest.

But Shen Yuan had never hugged Luo Binghe *like this.*

He returned the hug, feeling only mildly flustered at first.

Then the hug continued.

And *continued.*

"A-Ah…" Shen Yuan mumbled into Luo Binghe's chest. It was… quite the chest! Very muscular. So… so many muscles. So… so much touching… "Binghe…"

The other man tightened his hold, snuggling in closer. His cheek rubbed the top of Shen Yuan's head.

"Alright." Shen Yuan tapped his disciple's back. "That's enough, Binghe!"

Luo Binghe pressed his nose into his hair. Then he *breathed in.*

Ah, Binghe?! Your boyfriend is in the other room!! Shouldn't you be doing this to him?! Not an old man like me!!

Frowning, Shen Yuan shoved back against Luo Binghe's chest and was relieved when he was able to put at least a hand's width between them. That hold was *far* too intimate, Binghe!! *What* are you doing?! "How old are you?" Shen Yuan gently reprimanded him, reaching up to pinch his cheek. "Are you a child?"

"Mn, no," Luo Binghe said, eyes dark with… something. His hands slid down Shen Yuan's back, and tugged them close enough that their bodies pressed together. "This Binghe is no longer a child," he continued, voice rumbly and low. "He's just very greedy for his shizun."

What.

Shen Yuan's cheeks threatened to burst in flames. *Binghe?! What kind of strange proclamation is that?! Someone might get the wrong idea!!* He shook his head to clear it, and he wiggled away to break out of his disciple's arms. "So sticky," he said, clicking his tongue because he wasn't sure how to respond to that.

The… whatever emotion in Luo Binghe's eyes faded. His expression became lively with a bright smile, and he caught one of Shen Yuan's arms in a hold. "Come on, Yuan-gege! Let's eat!"

If Shen Yuan wanted to, he could have broken from the contact. Even if his disciple's hold was secure, he knew if he tried to slip out that Luo Binghe would let him go.

He did not push him away.

Instead, he held on tighter. As the two of them left the room, Shen Yuan leaned on his disciple. Pleasant conversation bubbled between them, with Luo Binghe asking about the plushie and Shen Yuan happily explaining what he knew about the beast. They walked together back to the dining room table, leaving the door to Shen Yuan's office open.

Chapter End Notes

LBH and LQG have their own phones, yes they are completely set up. Will LBH use his own phone? No... no, he won't. Why? When Shizun is right there...

Also, only because I am currently writing The Thread of Fate Says We Will Meet Again (with bitchless_in_baihe) I really love adding in little easter eggs to the other fic... One is kind of obvious in this chapter, but *technically* there are two.

Another update: I moved! The next posting will feature two chapters, an update for everyone, and another skippable smut chapter. Because of all of this... I am not sure I will be seeing you all next Saturday!

If not, you will for sure see two chapters March 7th!

Thank you everyone!

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

6.4k which is roughly a 28 minute reading time.

Hello everyone! Thank you so much for your patience!!

Please excuse the cliche in here... my excuse is... it was *funny*, okay? I had to...

CW: Oblivious!Shen Yuan, and not much else... I believe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shizun was a highly intelligent individual. The fact that he was able to step into the role of Qing Jing Peak Lord attested to that. But somehow, incredibly so, the man was the most frustratingly oblivious being in existence. The three of them sat at the dining table. Luo Binghe held out a pair of chopsticks, eyes half-lidded in a flirtatious manner with the corner of his lip quirked in a way he *knew* was alluring. “Yuan-gege,” he purred, “you should try this.”

Blinking up at him, Shen Yuan paused mid-bite. He glanced down at the chopsticks and his pale skin colored a delightful pink. Leaning back in his chair, Shen Yuan finished chewing his food and pushed his plate forward. “Here.”

Luo Binghe forced his expression not to twitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted his shishu sliding a hand over his face to hide the amused twitch of his lips.

Every. Single. Attempt. Failed.

“Yuan-gege, here!” Luo Binghe insisted, bypassing the plate to lift the chopsticks towards his mouth.

The most frustrating of it *all* was that his shizun *did* react to the flirtations on some level. He held some obvious interest, at least until some mental wall came crashing down and he withdrew faster than a turtle into its shell.

“Ah, Binghe,” Shen Yuan reprimanded, still obviously flustered. “I can feed myself, mn?”

Liu Qingge had to fully turn his head away at this point.

The tears that pricked Luo Binghe’s eyes weren’t entirely just for show. Some of it was from frustration. At this point, he might just need to lay it out for his shizun. Part of him despaired

that even if he *did* hold Shen Yuan down and tell him, *"I am in love with you,"* that the man would just pat his head and say something like:

"*Oh, Binghe! This master cares a lot about you too!*"

"Oh, Binghe…" Shen Yuan tutted. He reached across the table to ruffle his hair. "What is this, mn? What are these tears for?"

"…I just wanted Shizun to try," Luo Binghe muttered, despondent.

The war god had pretended to drop something so he could hide a quiet snort.

Sighing, Shen Yuan said, "…alright." He stretched towards him and hesitantly opened his mouth.

Luo Binghe brightened up. With one hand, he reached over and caught his shizun's chin. Then he fed him. He waited for Shen Yuan's lips to wrap around his chopsticks before he slowly extracted them. His other hand stayed, thumb trailing across his shizun's lower lip.

The light pink of Shizun's blush deepened. He tore from the hold and chewed, shielding the lower half of his face with his hand.

"Well?" Luo Binghe prompted.

"Binghe is an amazing cook," Shen Yuan placated, as soon as he swallowed.

"Thanking Shizun…" Luo Binghe replied, sobbing inwardly.

Liu Qingge snorted.

When the three of them finished their meal, Shen Yuan clapped his hands together and said, "What sort of movie would you two like to see?"

"What is a movie?" Liu Qingge asked.

"It is… sort of like a theater," Shen Yuan said, thoughtfully. He took a moment to consider how best to describe it. As always, whenever he was lost in thought, a wrinkle formed between his eyebrows and he pinched his lips. (Though, often a fan obscured most of his expression whenever he did this.)

It was… adorable.

Luo Binghe had thought of all the times he could rub that wrinkle away, either with a gentle thumb or by leaning in and pressing his lips against his shizun's forehead. Just the thought of it made his heart tremble.

"Remember the videos I showed you?" Shen Yuan said once he decided how best to give his explanation. "The cooking competitions. It will be moving pictures like that, except with people as actors. There are many types of movies; action, comedy, romance… all tell some type of story."

“Yuan-gege should show us his favorites,” Luo Binghe suggested. He liked seeing what his shizun found joy in. The music that he had shared a while back both surprised Luo Binghe and charmed him. There were so many facets to his shizun he had yet to discover, and he wanted to know *all* of them.

“…I suppose I could do that,” Shen Yuan said. His brow wrinkled as he fell deeper in thought. “I’ll find something that I think you’ll both enjoy.” He set his chopsticks aside and eased out of his seat. Compared to the last time they were here, he moved easier than he did before. In fact, he had left his cane by the front door and hadn’t used it since.

Luo Binghe itched to ask him more about it, though he did not know if it was too personal.

(He wanted – no, *needed* – to know everything.)

His shizun walked across the room and started messing around with the TV. When he was not pretending to be a Qing Jing peak lord, he was more relaxed. He still moved with a natural grace, even as he ended up flopping onto the couch with his knees tucked up under his chin.

Liu Qingge gathered a few dishes and leaned over to murmur in Luo Binghe’s ear, “Your method isn’t working.”

Since his shishu had so *graciously* leaned in, Luo Binghe stole a quick kiss from him. A small, surprised sound escaped the war god. It left Luo Binghe wanting for more. As he moved to do just that, his shishu placed a hand on his chest and kept him at bay. There was a warning glint in Liu Qingge’s eyes.

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe whined.

“…just tell him,” Liu Qingge told him.

That was one way to go about it. Luo Binghe’s insides squirmed with anxiety. He glanced at the back of his shizun’s head. What if he walked over and prostrated himself to the man…?

His eyes fell. The only image he saw was one where Shen Yuan smiled at him kindly and thanked him, and gently turned him down.

Eyes soft, Liu Qingge stepped closer. Before he said anything, he paused to see if Shen Yuan was paying attention. The man was mumbling to himself about “shitty plots” and “too many cliches” as he scoured through options on the screen. Mouth quirking fondly, Liu Qingge turned back to Luo Binghe and said, “You will still love him if he can not return your feelings.”

Luo Binghe’s throat closed and his eyes burned. It was a lonely thought. He was a greedy man who wanted everything he could get, including his shizun’s heart. But in the end, his shishu was right. Even if he could never have him *that way,* Luo Binghe would have him as a shizun and that would always be enough. He nodded.

“After the movie,” Liu Qingge said, “we will tell him.”

That put a time limit on it. Nerves squirmed in Luo Binghe's stomach. He pressed his lips together, fighting back the squirrely fear that ran circles in his gut.

After a moment's hesitation, Liu Qingge took his hand and threaded their fingers together. He tightened his grip, staring Luo Binghe in the eye. "Together. We will tell him."

"...you'll… still care even if…?" Luo Binghe started, choking on the words. His eyes closed and he fell forward, forehead resting on the war god's shoulder. "Will… Shishu still want… me if Shizun…?"

Will you still want me even if he doesn't?

"*Yes,* Binghe," Liu Qingge said. Arms wrapped around him, tightening with steel-like strength until all the air bled from his lungs. His shishu rested his cheek against his head, cementing him to reality. "Binghe is Binghe."

The war god always struggled with words, especially when it came to using them with "feelings." The tight, reassuring hold and quiet declaration was enough to soothe away some of Luo Binghe's fears. He melted. Then the hold loosened so he could breathe. He almost wished it didn't. He would gladly be crushed by his shishu, pulverized into nothing, just to feel how much the man cared for him.

They parted, much to Luo Binghe's reluctance, and cleared away the table. He whined dramatics about his shishu helping, pouting and clinging onto the war god as he ferried plates back and forth; all just to watch both his shizun and shishu laugh and smile at his antics. After the table was cleared, Liu Qingge left the dishes for him to clean. He stalked over to the couch and leaned over the back of it.

"Yuan," the war god said, "what else? To get ready for the movie."

"Oh, well," Shen Yuan said, and he pulled out his phone. "Looks like the desserts are here, so-"

"Mn." Liu Qingge straightened abruptly and went to retrieve them.

There was a muffled sound of protest from the couch before Shen Yuan sighed and shook his head. The corner of his mouth tugged with fond frustration. He turned his attention back towards the TV.

The war god went to the front door, and grabbed a large bag from the other side. He returned to the couch, setting the food on the low table, and waited patiently for his next order.

Shen Yuan dragged his eyes away from the screen and gave him a wry look. "I can control the lights from my phone, so we don't need to worry about that. Maybe some blankets for you and-" His breath caught and he quickly corrected himself, "Sometimes it's nice… to cuddle something… when… watching."

"Mn," Liu Qingge answered, raising a single eyebrow. His eyes swept across the room. He plucked a blanket off the armchair and tossed onto the couch. Then he scoured the apartment

for more.

“O-Oh… I… was probably going to use this one, Qingge,” Shen Yuan murmured.

The war god ignored him.

“Do we need anything for the treats, A-Yuan?” Luo Binghe called.

“I’ll check!”

After a few more back-and-forths, they were finally all ready for a “movie.” The dishes were cleaned, lights set low, and desserts spread out on the low table in front of the couch. They even had some drinks, strange bottles with thin lids and something called a “straw,” that Shen Yuan was *very* excited for.

“Alright,” Shen Yuan said. He began to get ready to stand up, gathering both his blanket and the remote.

Luo Binghe caught his shishu’s eye.

Both nodded and quickly tossed themselves onto the couch. Liu Qingge landed with effortless grace, not unlike a predator settling down to rest, and sat partially on Shen Yuan’s blanket. On his shizun’s other side, Luo Binghe sprawled out so his head was in his shizun’s lap.

“Q-Qingge – Binghe?”

“Is this alright, Shizun?” Luo Binghe asked, rounding his eyes in the perfect picture of innocence.

Even in the low light of the apartment, it was easy to see the gentle flush on Shen Yuan’s cheeks. He stared, bewildered, at the two of them. His eyes flickered over towards his chair – the large one he usually retreated into.

“Can’t reach the food from there,” Liu Qingge reasoned.

“Mn!” Luo Binghe said, smiling. “And Yuan-gege won’t see the TV as well!” He twisted his face in a show of confusion. “Why would A-Yuan watch the movie from there?”

Shen Yuan’s mouth opened. Then it shut. He reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose, lips pressing into a hard line. He shook his head.

If Luo Binghe met eyes again with his shishu, his composure might break and he would laugh. It was obvious that his shizun was trying to provide an opportunity for the two of them to get closer. His shizun’s efforts weren’t wasted – because they would still very greedily take the opportunities he presented them, but instead just include him in it.

“...well,” Shen Yuan said, finally. “...this… works.” As he attempted some mental calculations, probably trying to figure out how to sneak away to let the two be alone, he

settled back in his seat. His hand settled atop Luo Binghe's head, seemingly without him realizing it. He dug his fingers into his curls.

If… this was going to happen the entire movie, Luo Binghe wasn't sure that any watching was going to occur. He was far too distracted by becoming a puddle. An additional set of hands caught his head, and careful fingers untied his hair from its pony, releasing all of his curls.

Oh…

Without any constraints now, Shen Yuan threaded his fingers through all of Luo Binghe's hair. His eyes fell shut before he knew it. He was *not* going to watch a movie tonight. He was alright with that.

It wasn't until he heard a small laugh that he realized the movie had never started. His eyes peeled open, and he blinked in confusion up at his shizun and shishu. Both were pressed close together, with the phone pointed right at him.

"Is Binghe too sleepy for a movie?" Shen Yuan asked, laughter straining his voice.

"No, Shizun," Luo Binghe denied as he yawned.

Liu Qingge snorted, eyes on the phone. "That's a good one."

Unsure *what* they were laughing at, Luo Binghe pouted.

"Sorry, sorry," Shen Yuan said, hiding a smile with a hand. He turned the phone around to show him.

There was a still image of Luo Binghe mid-yawn.

Luo Binghe frowned.

"That's another good one," his shishu said, pointing down at his face.

"You say that," Shen Yuan said with a laugh, already turning the phone around to catch another likeness of Luo Binghe. "But I don't think that Binghe could *ever* look bad."

That… was a compliment, wasn't it? It was a very "gay" compliment. Luo Binghe met eyes with his shishu, who shrugged. "Shizun…" he whined, and he rolled to press his face into his shizun's stomach.

He felt Shen Yuan jump and stiffen underneath him. "A-Ah… Binghe…" His hand settled on the side of Luo Binghe's head. "You were just so cute… and then I remembered I have the power of a mobile camera. Would you like to see the pictures?"

Luo Binghe did not want to move, actually. He huffed, and peeked up at his shizun. "Apologizing to Shizun, for…"

“Being tired?” Shen Yuan replied. He *tsked* and pinched his cheek. “Binghe works so hard. You cooked such extravagant meals today. And you even cleaned the apartment, which you didn’t have to do by the way. I have someone who comes in and cleans. But I do appreciate it. Binghe can sleep. Qingge and I can watch the movie.”

The phone was snatched away partway through that monologue. Liu Qingge made a satisfied sound and stared happily down at the screen.

Shen Yuan narrowed his eyes. “What did you do?”

With a pleased expression, Liu Qingge turned the phone to them. He had captured Shen Yuan sternly pinching Luo Binghe’s cheek. The two of them… Luo Binghe’s breath caught. They looked so intimate. The camera didn’t capture most of his own expression, other than his eyes staring devotedly up at his shizun.

“Aiyah…” Shen Yuan mumbled, covering his face. “Qingge…”

Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow and turned the phone back around.

“Qingge!” Shen Yuan protested. He snatched out a hand to try and steal back his phone. “Why pictures of *me?”*

Amusement glittered in Liu Qingge’s eyes and he leaned out of Shen Yuan’s reach. He continued to take pictures of him, the corner of his lip curled.

Shen Yuan huffed, annoyed, and he said, “If anything, *we* should be taking pictures of *you!* You’re the beautiful one here!”

Yet *another* incredibly “gay” comment. Already knowing the answer, Luo Binghe pouted, “Is Binghe not beautiful?”

His shishu snorted. He knew exactly what he was doing.

“I…” Shen Yuan paused. “Of course Binghe is beautiful.” He looked confused. “Binghe is the most handsome!”

“The *most…?”* Liu Qingge said, and he actually managed to… not *pout* but it was close to it.

Shen Yuan gaped at him. “Qingge is incredibly handsome too!”

“But not the most,” Luo Binghe said, cheekily.

“...” Shen Yuan was at a loss for words. His expression hardened and he threw them both annoyed glares. “You two are terrible."

Giggling, Luo Binghe cried out, “Shizun! Shizun, no! We’re sorry!” He wrapped his arms around his shizun’s waist.

“No, if you two are going to play around, you can watch the movie by yourselves!” He threatened, though he didn’t make any attempt to move.

“Mn,” Liu Qingge said, drawing in closer. He caught Shen Yuan’s chin in a gentle hold and he turned his face this way and that.

“...Q-Qingge?” Shen Yuan asked. His voice was small.

The war god didn’t answer at first. He examined Shen Yuan at every possible angle he could with the two of them sitting side by side. After an extended amount of silence, he dropped his shixiong’s face and nodded. “Handsome.”

Shen Yuan’s eyes widened, and his face flushed with embarrassment. His mouth opened. No sound came out.

“That’s the requirement for pictures?” Liu Qingge asked. He lifted the phone and took a few.

“Mn,” Luo Binghe agreed. “Shizun should have *all* the pictures.”

Shocked into stillness, Shen Yuan stared at them. He slowly lifted a hand and shielded his face, shrinking. He let out a choked laugh and shook his head. “You… you two. You…” He closed his eyes and covered his face with both of his hands.

Liu Qingge took one last picture before he set the phone aside. He met eyes with Luo Binghe, mirth tugging a smile onto his lips. Then he leaned to bump his shoulder against his shixiong. “A-Yuan. Can you eat all of this?”

It took a few moments before Shen Yuan emerged back from his shell. He cautiously peeked out before he stared down at the food. “Oh, no. I can’t. But I got something for myself, don’t worry.”

“What is it?” Liu Qingge asked. He held up one of the drinks as a silent question.

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan said, “I don’t want that just yet. But, there… ah. See those?” He pointed to a box on the far corner. “I can have those. Can you take one out and put the rest in the freezer?”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge said. He followed the instructions and came back with a some sort of frozen treat on a stick.

“It’s ice cream,” Shen Yuan told him, delightedly. “This kind, of course, doesn’t have any dairy. It’s not as sweet as normal ice cream, which means you’ll probably like it, Qingge!”

“What does Binghe want to try?” Liu Qingge asked, looking over the abundant spread of desserts.

“Wait,” Shen Yuan said, and he wiggled as he shifted forward. “Let me put together some plates for you two. I had you in mind…” His voice trailed off. He set the ice cream aside, and began to fill two plates with an assortment of treats.

That meant that he had to bend over, which smothered Luo Binghe. He had absolutely no complaints, and he breathed in greedily. At some point, his shishu tugged on his hair in

warning. He pouted, giving his shishu big eyes to try and convince the man that he was being *innocent.*

The war god didn't seem to believe him, face set in a deadpan.

"...if Binghe wants to eat, he might need to sit up," Shen Yuan said, apologetically.

Or A-Yuan could feed me, he thought, greedily. As much as he wanted to be a deviant, he decided that he already had selfishly (and shamelessly) reveled too much in his shizun's leniency. He sat up and accepted his plate of sweets.

"Neither of you have to eat all of it," Shen Yuan told them. "I just… thought you might have fun trying something new." He fidgeted with his blanket, settling it across his legs.

The war god considered the blanket, and wordlessly he tugged the edge of it.

With a warm smile, Shen Yuan draped it over his legs. He shot Luo Binghe a look with a raised eyebrow as a silent question. Luo Binghe nodded eagerly. His shizun adjusted the blanket so all three of them were cocooned in cozy warmth.

"Alright, everyone ready?" Shen Yuan asked.

"Yes, Shizun!"

After receiving a nod from Liu Qingge, Shen Yuan started the movie. He sat back in his seat, exuding calm elegance. His lips curved ever so slightly in anticipated joy. A loud sound from the TV drew Luo Binghe's attention towards it. Before he realized it, he was sucked into a whole new world.

The movie was something that seemed quite fantastical; there were weapons that made loud noises, people who had strong enough athleticism to be cultivators, and well-timed humor. A lot of the jokes were lost on Luo Binghe, which he assumed was because of cultural context — the only way he knew it was supposed to be funny was because Shen Yuan would quietly huff a laugh or cover his mouth.

Halfway through the movie, during a lapse of action, Liu Qingge stirred and said, "Yuan." He turned and grabbed something out of view before offering it.

"Oh, my ice cream!" Shen Yuan exclaimed.

Luo Binghe had only nibbled at his own plate, too consumed by the movie to be able to pay attention to the food. (He actually wanted to take the time to try each dessert, and see which he might be able to recreate. Some of them were quite impressive in their presentation. These were *not* low quality. Again, it never failed to surprise him how much Shen Yuan could just throw around money without really thinking too much about it.)

"Ah… it's partially melted, that's fine," Shen Yuan said. He carefully divested the ice cream of its clear cover, and he set it aside atop some napkins. Some of the ice cream dripped down his hands, and he let out a small noise before wrapping his lips around-

Luo Binghe's mouth dried.

Juices spilled around Shen Yuan's mouth as he attempted to catch all of the falling liquid with his tongue. More than a few drips escaped, chasing down his hands and arms.

The smart thing probably would have been to throw away the ice cream and get a new one. Luo Binghe was thinking that there wasn't a single soul in that apartment that even *knew* what "smart" meant.

Not at that moment, with Shen Yuan's tongue chasing liquid on his hands and fingers.

Whatever was going on in the movie did *not* matter. It didn't exist. Not outside this ice cream and his shizun's tongue.

Luo Binghe couldn't *breathe.*

Suddenly it felt all too hot underneath the blanket, though he was afraid if he moved it would be far too telling.

Shen Yuan pulled the ice cream out of his mouth with a *pop* and a small noise left Liu Qingge. The war god turned his head away, eyes wide. Even in the low light, it was easy to see the vibrancy of his blush.

"Oh," Shen Yuan said, staring down at his hands. "Well… I am sticky and sort of got my mouth all over it, but if you want to try it, you can!" He laughed, as if he said something completely normal.

Luo Binghe threw a glance towards the heavens. It took every ounce of restraint to stay sitting and *not* grab his shizun. He had never seen… such a display from the man before.

"Well. Would you look at that." Shen Yuan leaned in towards the war god, lips curling into a teasing smirk. "Qingge finished all of his dessert!"

A shuddering breath escaped Liu Qingge's mouth. His lashes fluttered as his eyes darkened. Smoldering heat burned in that gaze.

"So, is it that you *don't* like sweets," Shen Yuan asked, "or does Qingge like them *too* much?" His eyes curved into delighted crescents.

Liu Qingge opened his mouth to answer, and no sound came out.

With a soft laugh, Shen Yuan bumped their shoulders together. "Qingge has so much restraint! Holding himself back even when he craves it! No one can *ever* know that the war god likes things! What would people do? Knowing that the great War God of Bai Zhan enjoys things! Oh, *no*…." He waved the ice cream with a sharp click of his tongue. Looking downright mischievous, he dropped his voice and raised a single eyebrow. The two of them were close now – *so close.* "Qingge. I have a secret for you."

Breath catching, the war god managed to say, "Mn?"

“It’s just us here,” Shen Yuan told him, searching his eyes. “Take what you want. Don’t hold back on our account. We support Qingge taking what he wants, right Binghe?” He popped that damnable ice cream bar back into his mouth.

Luo Binghe couldn’t answer.

There was a breath of silence, with the movie running in the background. Liu Qingge moved. He let out a long, shaky breath. Then he murmured, “Mn.” There was a dark heat in the war god’s eyes. He watched the ice cream and Shen Yuan’s mouth with narrowed focus. Then he swallowed.

Shen Yuan pulled the ice cream back out of his mouth, slightly confused. “Oh, you want a taste?”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge breathed, his voice shaking. He didn’t take his eyes away from Shen Yuan’s lips.

“Go ahead-”

His voice trailed away as Liu Qingge grabbed his chin. He drew closer, eliminating the distance between them. There was plenty of time for Shen Yuan to protest or break away. He didn’t. The war god kissed him.

A startled sound escaped Shen Yuan. His fingers loosened on the ice cream. Luo Binghe had just enough of a brain to snatch up the (melted) treat before it fell onto the blanket. His eyes never left the two others on the couch.

At first, Shizun was frozen. His eyes widened with disbelief.

Then Liu Qingge’s hand drew around the back of his neck, and he angled their heads and deepened the kiss.

Shen Yuan’s eyes closed, and he sank into the war god’s tender hold.

Quiet, small sounds left Shizun as he magnetized closer to his shidi. He reached out, sticky hands catching onto his shirt and attempting to slide around his neck. Each passing moment, he grew more enthusiastic. He chased after Liu Qingge’s lips, drawing closer to him until there was a mess of blankets and limbs.

Shen Yuan climbed into Liu Qingge’s lap.

Molten heat pooled in Luo Binghe’s core. He set the ice cream aside on a plate, hands itching at his sides. The tips of his fingers prickled, and his heart slammed hopelessly up his throat. Each breath caught as his lungs failed to fill. He ached to reach out and slide in behind his shizun, to squish him between both Liu Qingge and himself until he was a wrecked, panting mess.

He wanted to kiss him.

He *needed* to taste him.

Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan parted, breathing heavily. Both of their eyes were hazy. The war god flicked a glance towards Luo Binghe. He reached up, directing Shen Yuan to turn his head towards him. “Taste,” he ordered, voice rough and low.

That’s all Luo Binghe needed.

He lurched forward, catching his shizin’s mouth with his own. He squeezed his eyes shut, clutching desperately onto the loose fabric of his shizun’s sweatshirt.

A startled sound escaped Shen Yuan. He caught onto the side of Luo Binghe’s face to attempt to direct their kiss.

His hands were a mess and sticky, and Luo Binghe didn’t *care.*

He recalled how Liu Qingge instructed him – less biting, more exploring. He drew his tongue across his shizun’s lower lip.

It worked. Shen Yuan shivered and his lips parted with a gasp. He tasted sweet. He tasted like Liu Qingge. This was everything Luo Binghe had wanted for *years.* His hands shook as he pulled his shizun closer. Without any complaint, Shen Yuan moved. His small body was pliable and more than eager to slide onto him. He hardly weighed anything, thighs bracketing Luo Binghe’s hips, but it felt as if the very heavens had tied him down.

His shizun was sitting on him.

His shizun had *crawled* onto him – without too much prompting.

They were kissing.

They were kissing.

Tears prickled the corners of Luo Binghe’s eyes. His heart swelled in his chest to the point that it threatened to overtake his lungs. He broke away with a wet breath and choked out, *“Shizun.”*

Shen Yuan panted against his lips. He was flushed, hair mussed, and eyes dazed. He blinked a few times before he leaned in, eyes falling shut, and kissed Luo Binghe again.

He - he wanted to… on his own!

Behind Shen Yuan, the war god surged forward. He pressed his mouth to the side of Shen Yuan’s neck and left a trail of kisses down to his shoulder. One of his hands snaked between the two of them and drew up the front of Shen Yuan’s sweatshirt.

A groan slid from Shen Yuan’s lips.

Then he froze.

Awareness drifted back to him, and he shot off the couch not unlike the way a cat springs up out of a tub of water. He nearly crashed into the table of desserts and instead managed to

catch himself, stumbling away from the both of them. His hand shielded the front of his face, and he stared at them as if they had morphed into monsters.

(Well… stating "monsters" in that scenario wasn't necessarily *accurate* for his shizun, considering the man's undeniable fascination for all creatures. It was probably more accurate to say that it was as if both had revealed themselves to be women, or something. Or Yue Qingyuan.)

"A-Yuan," Liu Qingge called gently.

"W-Wait, hold on," Shen Yuan told him, throwing out a hand as if to stop either of them from chasing after him. He retreated a few more steps until he hit his chair and crashed back into it. He stared at them, dumbfounded.

Luo Binghe sat up.

With a startled cry, Shen Yuan raised both of his hands and shouted, "Wait!"

Extremely slowly, Luo Binghe looked over at his shishu. They both exchanged a glance before making a show of settling down on the couch.

Shen Yuan let out a long breath and covered his mouth with both of his hands. His knees curled up to his chest as he stared. The movie continued on in the background. There was some sort of big confrontation happening, with loud music and a lot of loud bangs. It continued on while Shen Yuan quietly assessed the situation. Then he swallowed. "You… two," he began, voice small and croaky. "You…" He motioned between them.

The two of them exchanged another glance. "Boyfriends," Liu Qingge said, and he seemed pleased to be able to say it.

Luo Binghe's mouth dropped open. Warmth settled around him like a comforting blanket. He reached out and caught his shishu's hand, throat closing with a surge of emotion.

With a jerky nod, Shen Yuan said, "Yes. Yes. You are. Okay." He raised an eyebrow and shrunk. "But." He covered his mouth again.

Someone screamed profanities on the TV. Liu Qingge threw it an annoyed glance, and he glared down at the remote for a few seconds before he figured out how to turn it off. Quiet settled around them, delicately.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe said, and he couldn't stop himself from moving towards him. He dropped to the ground, on his knees, and crossed over to him. "Shizun. This Binghe also… this Binghe loves you."

Shen Yuan stared at him.

Sighing, Liu Qingge stood. He walked around the table and drew closer to Shen Yuan on his other side. "A-Yuan." He took in a deep breath through his nose and he dropped down on his knees on the other side of the chair. "...I…." His eyes fell to the floor, and his hands tightened into fists. He clenched his jaw, eyebrows fiercely drawing together. "Me… too."

A sound left Shen Yuan. His lips moved, and he sputtered more noises, before he shook his head.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe said, reaching out to catch onto his hands. He was half afraid that the man would leap out of the chair and run away from them. “A-Yuan. We love you.”

Shen Yuan gaped.

Still, nothing.

There was heavy silence all around them. Luo Binghe felt as if he couldn’t properly breathe. A part of him felt like he stood back on the edge of the Abyss, with his shizun glaring down at him. His throat tightened. It would be *fine* if Shen Yuan didn’t return his feelings. No matter what, he would always care and love his shizun in whatever way he would be able to.

But he refused to give up without a fight.

Luo Binghe wondered for a moment if his shizun somehow didn’t understand… *this.* What the two were doing. Taking in a deep breath, he shifted forward. His fingers trembled as he caught onto his shizun’s hand. He looked him in the eye. “Shizun… A-Yuan. Qingge and I love you. We want to court you. We want to be your boyfriends. We’re gay. We want you.”

That had to be clear, right?

Color spread over Shen Yuan’s cheeks. One of his eyebrows crawled up his forehead. His eyes tore away from Luo Binghe to land on the war god.

Liu Qingge bravely slid forward and caught his other hand. He opened his mouth a few times, as if *trying* to get himself to say the words. In the end, he clenched his jaw and he nodded fiercely.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe continued, voice desperate. “Shizun. I love you. I *love* you. I’ve loved you for so long, Shizun, you’re *everything* to me.”

A small noise left Shen Yuan and he tore his hand free from Luo Binghe’s hold; he used it to cover his mouth to stop him from saying anything else. “I get it!” Shizun croaked and glared. “I understand, Binghe!”

Luo Binghe breathed in and he nodded. He waited.

It was *excruciating.*

Liu Qingge delicately took Shen Yuan’s hand and pressed a tender kiss to his knuckles.

With another sound, Shen Yuan covered *his* mouth and said, “I said I get it! Now *wait.”* He stared at the ground for a few minutes. Then he took back his hands as he ruffled his own hair. His eyes closed and he groaned. He slid his hands over his face and peeked between his fingers. “You two are… serious.”

“Yes, Shizun!” Luo Binghe cried.

“N-Not ‘Shizun!’” Shen Yuan snapped. “Not… not when…” His face twisted with embarrassment.

“A-Yuan,” Liu Qingge said, slowly. He searched his eyes. “You don’t need to love us back. It’s alright to be with you, like this.” He sat back to give Shen Yuan a little more space, expression saddened with a small and reassuring smile.

Luo Binghe breathed in deeply. He *knew* he should say the same, but he couldn’t get the words to leave his tongue. He sat back on his heels instead, forcing his hands to stay in his lap.

Selfish. Greedy. His eyes squeezed shut. He would try to be better – because his shizun deserved better. It would be easier with Liu Qingge at his side. But there would still be heartbreak. His lips trembled and he bowed his head.

“Oh, Binghe…”

Hands caught either side of his face. Gentle thumbs wiped away the tears on the corners of his eyes. Luo Binghe glanced up, throat tied in knots, as he searched his shizun’s gentle gaze. This was it. This was where his shizun kindly told him that he appreciated his feelings, but he did not return them.

Shen Yuan cleaned his face, eyes warm and kind. He hesitated. His eyebrows twitched together. He breathed in sharply through his nose, as if steeling himself, and then he slid forward.

He kissed Luo Binghe.

Just as quickly as he kissed him, Shen Yuan jerked back and turned his head away. His face was bright red as he crossed his arms and he said, “Fine.”

“Sh…” Luo Binghe swallowed the title and quickly amended, “A-Yuan?”

Liu Qingge smiled. He lifted up, leaning forward. His head cocked in a quiet question.

“I said ‘fine,’ didn’t I?” Shen Yuan said, stiffly. He glanced away, embarrassed, before he met Liu Qingge in the middle and kissed him.

“A-Yuan… feels the same?” Luo Binghe asked, voice whispery and weak.

Pulling back from the kiss, Shen Yuan threw him an embarrassed glare. “Yes! Yes! What else do I have to say? Yes!”

Liu Qingge snorted, his eyes curving with his delight.

“Shizun!” Luo Binghe cried. He launched forward and caught onto his shizun’s face. He pulled him close, and fiercely pressed their lips together.

The motion surprised Shen Yuan, and the two ended up sliding right off the chair. He cried out against Luo Binghe’s lips, but was unable to do much more.

With ease, Liu Qingge darted forward and caught both of them before they crashed into the low table. He guided them to the floor, shaking his head.

Luo Binghe caught onto the front of the war god's shirt and hauled him close so he could steal a kiss.

Shen Yuan took the moment to catch his breath. He was squished between both his shidi and Luo Binghe, legs a tangled mess.

This… this was *everything* that Luo Binghe wanted. It was perfect. Everything was *perfect.* He fell back, breaking away from Liu Qingge, to give both Shen Yuan and him a moment together. His eyes stung and he found himself grinning. He hiccuped on a surge of relief, love, and pure happiness. Tears trailed down his cheeks.

The kisses between his shishu and shizun stalled.

Shen Yuan caught sight of Luo Binghe's expression. "What is this, eh?" he muttered, frowning. He was ruined, lips already red and swelling, as he glanced down at Luo Binghe. "What is with all these tears, Binghe? How old are you?"

"Apologizing to Shizun," Luo Binghe said, weakly. "This disciple is… very happy." His breath hitched and he smiled.

"…Binghe," Shen Yuan murmured in a soft voice.

"Cry baby," Liu Qingge said. He smirked and kissed some of his tears away.

"Shishu…" Luo Binghe whined. He didn't really care. Because this was *everything.* He was loved. Reaching out, he caught onto both of his beloved, and he held them close.

Greedy and selfish. But *theirs.*

Chapter End Notes

SQQ/SY: I can't show too much interest in this woman!! I don't want LBH to think that I'm a rival!!!!!

LBH: Shizun acts so shy and distant around women... huh...

We made it!! Confession scene!!

I know when I last saw everyone, I promised a smut chapter would be uploaded today - but here's the thing... good news and bad news (depending on your feelings towards smut chapters)

This... *creature* of a chapter has ended up as 11k. The LONGEST chapter of this ENTIRE fic is a threesome. I...

...oops?

So... bad news: smut chapter not posted today.

Good news: it's... monstrously 11k and will be posted next week?

Also, for those of you not interested in the smut... I am sorry you will have to wait two weeks 🙏

Between moving and my health, I am still struggling to write ahead - though we are SO close to the end you guys. Hopefully soon we'll have a final chapter count!

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

....ah. Um. 13k. Roughly 45 minute reading time...?

Hello! This entire chapter is smut. Nothing plot-related occurs. If you're not interested in the smut and would just like a summary, please click here!

Content Warning: First Time (but somehow it isn't terrible), fingering, dirty talk, "dubious consent" but mainly from Shen Yuan lacking the ability to just say what he wants because he's a little bit of an idiot, penetration, the start of a blowjob, cum facial, rough play, almost ass eating but denied (someone's not happy about it), Shen Yuan says "fuck" quite a few times, minor restraint... there kind of are just a lot of naked bodies and a lot of eyes to goggle and watch. They're horny about it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kissing his shizun in a dream was nothing like kissing him in the waking world. There was so much heat, Luo Binghe felt like he was being boiled alive. He lay on his back, hands groping and searching. The tips of his fingers found smooth skin and he wondered if that's what it felt like to lay hands on a god. There was so much sensation. The feathery weight of a body on top of him, thin legs wrapped around his thigh, and *Liu Qingge.* The man was adding gasoline to a fire. He would do something to Shizun that would make the man gasp against Luo Binghe's lips, which sent molten heat straight to his groin.

When the war god wasn't doing… *whatever* to his shizun, he was teasing Luo Binghe, dragging nails up his thigh, squeezing his sides, and biting his throat. At one point, Luo Binghe had to break out of the kiss to *moan* as his shishu sucked a bruise onto his neck.

"What?" Shen Yuan panted in response to the moan, "What the *fuck."*

Hot air washed over Luo Binghe's neck as Liu Qingge let out one soft, *ha.* He had a smile tucked into the corner of his mouth when switched over to claim Shen Yuan's neck for himself.

Breath hitching, Shen Yuan reached out as if to keep the war god at bay. His fingers ended up rooting into the cloth of his light jacket as his head fell back.

Luo Binghe shifted and… *oh.*

That… that was his shizun's arousal pressing into his thigh.

A fierce, almost animalistic, emotion surged through Luo Binghe. He wanted to throw his shizun onto his back and tear his clothes away from him. He barely held himself back. His fingers dug into the carpet. It was hard to breathe. More than anything, he wanted to take his shizun's cock into his hand, or his mouth, and feel the weight of him. He needed to see him. He needed to feel him. He *needed* him. Before he knew what he was doing, his mouth was moving and he was begging, "Shizun, Shizun… Shizun, I want you. Shizun… please let us have you. Shizun."

"B-Binghe!" Shen Yuan yelped. "*Not* 'Shizun!' Not like this!" His glare was somewhat ruined by Liu Qingge nibbling on his ear. It broke in seconds and his expression dissolved with surprised pleasure. His eyebrows lifted and pressed together, and his reddened lips parted.

"A-Yuan," Liu Qingge murmured. His hands slid around Shen Yuan's waist, his fingers trailing along the lip of his sweatshirt.

It seemed at that moment, what Luo Binghe had said finally clicked into Shen Yuan's mind. He pulled away, setting a hand on Liu Qingge's chest. His lips moved as he repeated, "*...want?"*

"Mn," Liu Qingge said. He did not keep pushing forward.

Luo Binghe, on the other hand, did. He slid his hands underneath his shizun's clothes, and dragged them greedily up his chest. Shen Yuan's stomach dipped as he gasped, and he threw a hand over his face to catch an involuntary sound from his lips.

"*Binghe,"* Liu Qingge growled in warning.

"....sorry Shishu, this disciple has waited *years* to have his shizun on top of him and now he's-"

Shen Yuan's eyes widened. He slapped his hands over Luo Binghe's mouth and exclaimed, "*Binghe!"*

Luo Binghe whined against the palms of his hands and he squirmed underneath him, making a point to arch his back and grind into Shen Yuan's thigh.

His shizun let out a weak, startled breath, eyes blowing wide as he felt Luo Binghe's arousal pressing into him. He mouthed two words in his shock. Shaking out of his daze, he threw a withering glare down at Luo Binghe and snapped, "Binghe! Not now."

Luo Binghe shivered underneath his shizun's scorn. He nodded, dropping his hands, and watched his shizun with heady eyes.

Seconds passed as Shen Yuan attempted to compose himself. His hand covered the lower half of his face. He attempted to school his expression into one of calm indifference, but it was

ruined by the blush that decorated his pale skin. He blinked a few times and finally said, “My hands are still sticky.”

With refined grace, he stood up and very much ignored the way his pants were tenting. He walked with his chin held high into the bathroom.

Watching him go, Luo Binghe rolled over and sat up so he could press a kiss to the corner of his shishu’s lips. He murmured, “He wants to.”

“We will not *force* him to,” Liu Qingge said, warningly.

“This Binghe would not… *force,”* he grumbled, irritated. Not that anyone would ever be able to force his shizun to do anything. The man was stubborn and had a thin face – it was best to figure out how best to soothe and cajole him.

Expression softening, Liu Qingge turned to him. He gave him a quick peck and said, “No. You would not.” He cupped Luo Binghe’s cheek, watching him with a tender gaze.

“...I suppose there’s no point finishing the movie,” Shen Yuan said from the bathroom. The faucet turned on. He washed his hands.

Liu Qingge drew back and straightened up onto his feet. He gave Luo Binghe a glance before he drew towards the bathroom. At the entryway, he stopped and leaned against the doorframe. “We still can. If A-Yuan wants.”

Shaking his head, Luo Binghe drew to his feet. He was smiling as he started cleaning up all of the leftovers. He closed cake containers and compiled other treats into boxes. Even as he cleaned, he kept a keen ear on what was going on in the bathroom. All three of them were at a standstill.

The war god would not press or push his shixiong to go further than they already had, because he would wait to hear permission from Shen Yuan first. Either because he had this preconceived notion of *respect* or he didn’t want to be gluttonous with his desires.

But Shizun wasn’t the type of person to say what he wanted. He was the type of person to look after all others first and then *maybe* in the quiet hours of his own time, he would do something for himself.

He was also the certain type of person to be *very clear* when it was something he did not want – so Luo Binghe was not at all worried about Shen Yuan *not* wanting to have sex with them. Shy, of course. And easily flustered. But not at all *uninterested.*

“I wasn’t sure if a movie would be something that Qingge enjoys,” Shen Yuan said, voice light with a hint of shyness. Luo Binghe could not see the two of them, but he could envision his shizun ducking his chin and not looking his shishu in the eyes. After years of repressed pining, the truth of how they felt about another was (mostly) out in the open. None of it had exactly been said aloud, but the truth was still there: they loved another. But… both were too used to the ambiguous barrier they had used to hide behind after all these years. They didn’t

know what it meant now that their feelings were out in the open and reciprocated. That was okay. Luo Binghe would show them.

“I didn’t mind,” Liu Qingge told him. “Binghe liked it.” He paused and scuffed his foot on the ground. “...I like watching other people watch those things. Helps me understand it better.”

“Ah,” Shen Yuan said with a smile. “I suppose I could see that.”

A strained silence pressed between the two of them. Both were too shy to do anything else other than stand there, rubbing their arms and staring down at the ground.

Luo Binghe smiled fondly. He finished putting away the leftovers.

“A-Yuan.” Liu Qingge broke the silence.

“Y-Yes… Q-Qingge?”

“I…”

There were some shuffling sounds, and Luo Binghe glanced over his shoulder. Shocked, he saw Liu Qingge pressed against the doorframe with Shen Yuan up on his tip-toes, kissing him. It was difficult to tell who started it, with both clinging desperately onto the other.

Shen Yuan, for lack of a better word, fell away from Liu Qingge’s mouth. His face twisted in frustration, and he grumbled something about “giants.”

Whatever he grumbled made the corners of the war god’s mouth pull into a true smile. (He… was so handsome when he smiled. Both worlds truly were lucky that Liu Qingge’s default expression was a scowl, or else wars might have been fought over for him.) He reached down and hoisted Shizun up by his thighs.

Startled, Shen Yuan cried out. His arms latched around Liu Qingge’s neck and he turned his head away from him. He scowled and reprimanded, “Qingge!”

“Now you’re tall, too,” the war god told him, almost impish.

Shen Yuan threw him a sharp glare.

Laughter spilled from Luo Binghe, drawing their attention. He grinned and tried to sound apologetic as he said, “Shishu isn’t wrong, Shizun!” He studied the way his shizun’s legs wrapped around the war god’s hips and the hands digging into his thighs to keep him aloft. The heat that had boiled his gut returned in force.

Catching sight of his expression, Liu Qingge ordered, “Leave the dishes.” He raised an eyebrow and then looked pointedly at the cabinet where Luo Binghe had stashed the lubricant. Then the war god took his prize off into the bedroom.

No one had to tell Luo Binghe twice. (Even though it *did* grieve him to leave something unfinished like that…) He quickly gathered his hidden stash of *items* and excitedly dashed

into the bedroom.

Liu Qingge stripped the bed of its covers and left only the sheets. There he placed Shen Yuan down, kissing him hungrily. He eased soft, pliant sounds from Shizun while his hands slid over his sides. It was as if he was trying to map every single inch of Shen Yuan with touch alone.

Enjoying the show, Luo Binghe set his stash aside on the nightstand. He began to organize it — items they would most likely use tonight, and… others for a later date. Then he became distracted.

In the midst of their make-out, Shen Yuan let out a surprised moan and arched his back. His hips pressed against Liu Qingge and his head rolled back. Lips trembling, he clutched tightly onto the war god's shoulders. His lashes fluttered against his cheeks. He was a piece of art, wretchedly alluring.

Luo Binghe couldn't breathe.

"*A-Yuan,"* Liu Qingge murmured in awe.

Eyes blinking open, Shen Yuan collapsed back against the bed. He shrank, arms lifting to cover his face. "What is this, ah? Why are you two… focusing… on me?" He tried to sound indifferent; his voice was too winded for it to really hit its mark.

With a fond smile, Liu Qingge didn't answer. He started kissing along his jaw and down his throat. One of his hands squeezed his thigh, drawing up to his hip, before sliding underneath his sweatshirt.

Another sound escaped Shen Yuan and his arms clamped down around his head. His legs quivered as he tried not to react to the war god's searching hand. Toes curling, he turned his just enough to smother himself in the crook of his elbow.

Luo Binghe walked around the bed until he reached his shizun's side. He sat, the bed sinking underneath him.

Face bright red, Shen Yuan opened up his arms just enough to peek up at him. He frowned. "Um. Hi."

Swallowing a laugh, Luo Binghe leaned over him and murmured, "Hello, Shizun. Can this disciple kiss you?"

"I said," Shen Yuan grumbled, he reached out and cruelly pinched his cheek, "not-"

His words dissipated into a startled cry. He clamped a hand over his mouth, muffling another sound, as his eyes widened. Color drenched his cheeks, flooding down his throat. He tried not to squirm.

(...Luo Binghe had never been so fucking *hard* in his life.)

The war god had shoved up his shirt enough that it sat around his collarbones, exposing his chest. Soft pink nubs pebbled; Liu Qingge's thumb teased around one.

Days ago, they had both seen Shen Yuan shirtless. It had only been for a moment, and now they both had the time to soak it *all* in. Shizun was so pale he was practically translucent. He was also far too thin for Luo Binghe to be comfortable – with bruises on his side from when he had crashed into the wall upon the war god's first arrival.

Liu Qingge abandoned his shizun's chest to slide a palm over the bruises, wordlessly trying to soothe them and ask for forgiveness. His mouth, on the other hand, trailed down from his collarbones to the nipple he had abandoned earlier.

Apparently, his shizun was quite sensitive in that area.

"Oh," Shen Yuan choked. He twitched, legs folding with his feet digging into the mattress. He lost control and his hips jerked. Another involuntary sound squeezed from his throat. His arms clamped back around his face and he groaned, *"Oh. Q-Qingge-"*

His shizun was too beautiful to hide.

"A-Yuan," Luo Binghe whined, grabbing hold of one of his hands. "Please. I want to kiss you. Please…" He leaned over and started kissing his fingertips.

Leaving a trail of kisses, Liu Qingge moved from one sensitive area to the other. He wrapped his lips around the other pink nub.

Shen Yuan broke. A startled, pleading whine escaped his teeth. He captured Liu Qingge between his thighs, squeezing him. His hands caught onto Liu Qingge's hair. He gasped, groaned, desperately throwing his head back. Embarrassed, he choked out, "Enough! Enough! I-I'm n-not-"

Liu Qingge stopped, the corner of his lip curled. His steel eyes were sharp and ruthless. "Not what?" He sat up and met Luo Binghe's eyes; then he jerked his chin towards the sweatshirt that gathered around his shizun's collarbones.

Catching on immediately, Luo Binghe lurched forward and caught onto the fabric. He eased it up Shen Yuan's arms and slid it the rest of the way off. His shizun hardly noticed, struggling to come up with an answer.

"I-I… am not some maiden."

Dubiously, Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. He caught onto Shen Yuan's hips and lifted him as he pitched forward until both were flushed. His teasing expression loosened and he lost a modicum of his control, feeling Shizun's erection against his own. He breathlessly said, "I know."

Shen Yuan clamped a hand over his mouth and attempted to glare at him. He looked bullied instead.

"*A-Yuan,"* Luo Binghe whined. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. He trailed a hand down the length of his arm, then down his chest. His thumb passed over his nipple which made his shizun lurch underneath him. He pressed another kiss to the hand covering Shen Yuan's mouth.

Wordlessly, Liu Qingge slid out of the way.

It was *exactly* as Shen Yuan said – both were focusing on him. They were *starving* for this; years of yearning with nothing but the barest hint of affection. Now the two of them were going to feast.

Luo Binghe's heart pounded in his finger tips. He moved to sit in Liu Qingge's place, and he almost choked on air when his shizun spread his legs apart to let him in. It…

It all still felt like a dream.

His shizun lay before him, half naked. His eyes were averted, glaring off at the wall, as he tried to regain some of his senses. Since he was still stubbornly covering his mouth, Luo Binghe thought he might as well taste other things. He came back to himself and leaned forward, bracing his weight on a hand. He dragged his teeth along Shizun's ear and nibbled his earlobe. So close to his ear, he heard Shizun breathe sharply in through his nose. His legs tightened around Luo Binghe's hips. Luo Binghe closed his eyes and took a few seconds to regain his thoughts. All he really wanted to do was to pin his shizun down and grind roughly into him. He held back.

He continued down to his shizun's throat and pressed a kiss against his speeding pulse. Then he scraped his teeth across his skin. Shizun shivered underneath him, the quietest sound dragging up his throat. His eyes squeezed shut.

Smiling into the kiss, Luo Binghe trailed his lips down past his collarbones and his chest, kissing *around* an abused, perky nub.

(That was a test in willpower, because he *desperately* wanted to have his shizun writhe underneath him.)

Then he eased back and slid down to the loose pants that wrapped around his shizun's hips. His fingers traced reverently across his pale skin, watching as Shen Yuan's soft stomach dipped and shuttered with each breath. There was a trail of dark hair that led from his belly button down underneath his pants. Luo Binghe followed it with his lips.

A hand shot down and gripped onto his hair, holding him in place. "B-B-Binghe-" Shen Yuan cried out, then his voice cut off. There was a lot of movement on the bed.

When Luo Binghe glanced up, he saw that his shishu had slid in behind Shen Yuan, lifting him up just enough to be in his arms as he kissed down his neck and shoulders.

It was a breathtaking scene, his shizun stretched out in Liu Qingge's arms, pale skin flushed pink, with one hand desperately covering his mouth. His eyebrows had lifted and pressed together, as he lost himself in the blissful sensations of both of their touches.

Liu Qingge explored his chest, one hand squeezing his unbruised side while the other teased along his chest. His face was drawn with concentration, steel eyes dark and heady. He traced slow, teasing circles over Shen Yuan, drawing on his skin with his fingertips like a master calligrapher.

"A-Yuan," Luo Binghe said, murmuring into his hip bone. Underneath him, Shen Yuan jerked. His thighs clamped around Luo Binghe's shoulders. "A-Yuan, I am going to take off your pants." He waited for his shizun to protest or tell him not to. He kissed along his lower stomach and reached up with one of his hands, pushing against his shizun's thigh. It fell open with little resistance. Luo Binghe traced his hand along the inside of his thigh, thumb massaging along the lines of his inner muscle.

Shizun's arousal was *very* clear with his legs spread, tenting in his pants. It was tantalizing. Luo Binghe *ached* to see it. Long enough had passed where Shen Yuan could have told him "no." Which, for him, meant "yes."

Still, Luo Binghe moved slowly. He dipped his fingers along the edges of the waistband and dragged his nails along it.

Shen Yuan shivered, twisting just enough to hide his face in Liu Qingge's neck. His hand let go of Luo Binghe's hair and instead reached up to cling desperately onto the war god.

As tenderly as unwrapping a precious gift, Luo Binghe tugged down the pants. To his immense surprise (and pleasure), his shizun lifted his hips willingly. The fabric glided down to his knees. Once before, Luo Binghe had gotten the chance to see his shizun's underthings – tiny, little shorts that plastered to his skin. But he never got to see so much of it. Never before did he have permission to *ogle.*

These were a dark, rich blue with a darker stain where his erection strained against the fabric. Luo Binghe stared voraciously, and he peeled off the rest of his shizun's pants. There were a smattering of bruises on the man's pale legs. Luo Binghe tenderly lifted up one of his legs to kiss one of the bruises on the inside of his knee.

Shen Yuan gasped into the war god's neck. His fingers curled and his leg jerked. He cracked open his eyes to dare a glance down at Luo Binghe.

"A-Yuan is so beautiful," Luo Binghe purred. He placed delicate kisses up his thigh. His shizun's eyes squeezed shut and he turned his face to hide again.

Not that the war god was giving him any reprieve. His fingers slid over his chest, circling around his nipples.

Shizun writhed, fighting to stay still. His knee came up, almost as if to push Luo Binghe away. Reaching down, Luo Binghe lifted his leg even higher and hooked it over his shoulder. His mouth watered as he drew closer to his goal: the wet spot on his shizun's underthings.

He pressed his lips against the hardened length and Shizun jerked underneath him, eyes flying open. He wrapped his lips, as much as he could with the fabric, around his shizun's cock and pressed his tongue against the scorching heat. He tasted musky and slightly bitter.

It… was everything Luo Binghe wanted. He *needed* more. He sucked, trying to taste more of his shizun.

Gasping, Shen Yuan stared at him. "M-Mouth!? Binghe! Your *mouth!?* N-No!"

Luo Binghe pulled back just enough to nuzzle into his shizun's groin. He pouted, rounding in his eyes in a way that he knew weakened his shizun's resolve. "A-Yuan… you taste so good… this Binghe wants more."

"Oh, my God," Shen Yuan whispered.

"Don't push him," Liu Qingge warned, glowering. "Be respectful."

Oh, if only his shishu *knew* how much Luo Binghe was holding back. Then he would see all of his restraint and think that *this* bare bit was downright *worship.*

"Binghe, not your mouth," Shen Yuan said, hiding behind the palm of his hand. "Just…" He paused and frowned unhappily. "How come *I* am the only one naked!?"

"Shizun isn't naked…" Luo Binghe pouted and added, "...yet."

"*Not* 'Shizun,'" Shen Yuan snapped.

With a snort, Liu Qingge peeled away from Shen Yuan. He stole a kiss before he slid off the bed completely. Then he disrobed. He did it unceremoniously, setting his jacket and shirt down on the ground beside him.

Shen Yuan made a noise.

The war god paused and glanced up to make sure he wasn't going too fast for anyone's comfort.

Mouth agape, Shizun stared at Liu Qingge. His eyes jumped around his chest, down his torso, to the sharp lines of his hips that trailed down to his groin.

It took Luo Binghe a few moments to realize what was the problem – *yes,* the war god was fucking *attractive as hell.* But it was unlike his shizun to be so caught off guard-

Wait.

Luo Binghe smirked.

There were bite marks and bruises covering Liu Qingge from the previous night, all made by Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan glanced over at him, questioningly. When he saw the satisfied look on Luo Binghe's face, his eyes widened comically. He looked between the two of them.

"...just wait," Liu Qingge said with a sigh. "He's a little shit."

“Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe whined. “But… you left marks on this one too…” He pulled his shirt aside enough to show off a particularly vicious bite mark. It stung in the shower, in the best way.

“...you…” Shen Yuan blushed. There was a dazed look in his eyes.

Luo Binghe did not have to wonder what his shizun was daydreaming about. He leaned in closer, bending his knee up to his chest as he did, and kissed his shizun’s throat. “Ming-gege let me taste him,” he whispered against his skin. “He was so beautiful, A-Yuan. Trying to hold back, just like you, as I used my mouth to-”

“B-Binghe,” Shen Yuan pleaded, panting and embarrassed. He still had a distant look, envisioning the two of them.

“He makes such pretty sounds, A-Yuan. I want you to hear them. He also has… *really* good hands. He used them on me, wrapping his pretty fingers around my-”

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge growled in warning. He stood on weakened knees.

“We didn’t have a chance to go much further than that, A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe continued, stroking his shizun’s thigh and feeling him tremble underneath him. “I want to go all the way with you two tonight.”

“Sh-Shut up,” Shen Yuan pleaded. “Shut up.”

With an annoyed grunt, Liu Qingge kicked off his pants. The sound caught both Luo Binghe’s and Shen Yuan’s attention. With only his underthings left, the war god hesitated and glanced up at. The corner of his lip quirked, and a blush coated his cheeks. Coy and shy, he teased the lip of his undergarments. Then he pushed them down and stepped out of them.

The man had a cutting figure. Where Shen Yuan was soft and delicate, his shishu was cut muscle and power. He had a lethal elegance with the way he stood, one hip cocked and his arms crossed. His cock was stiff and red, with a gleaming liquid coating the tip. He raised his chin at them in a challenging manner, arching up an eyebrow.

Luo Binghe slid off the bed and launched himself at his shishu. He caught him and tugged him close, hungrily chewing his lower lip.

Grunting in annoyance, Liu Qingge grabbed him by the hair and yanked him back. He glared. “Stop. Biting.”

It pulled at his scalp delightfully – it was *exactly* what Luo Binghe had wanted. “Shishu, Shishu,” he panted, “you’re so handsome, Shishu. This Binghe wants to taste you again. Can I? Can I please? *Shishu.”*

“S-Shameless!” Liu Qingge balked. He shook his head, and shoved Luo Binghe back. “Clothes. *Now.”*

“Shishu should help me,” Luo Binghe purred. He drew in closer, grabbing at the war god’s bare hips and yanking him close. “My hands are full…” He slid them around to Liu Qingge’s

bare backside and grabbed two handfuls of his ass.

Shen Yuan made another sound.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luo Binghe saw his shizun reflexively tuck his legs to hide the way his body reacted to the display. They couldn't have that. Except that his hands were full…

An idea popped up in Luo Binghe's head. He waited for his shishu to rebel and push him back. He lurched forward and caught his shishu, twisting him around so he faced Shen Yuan while trapped in a tight hold. "Isn't Ming-gege breathtaking, A-Yuan?" Luo Binghe purred.

"I-Impertinent-!" Liu Qingge snarled. His face turned bright red.

"Ming-gege likes it when you compliment him, A-Yuan," Luo Binghe said, struggling to keep the war god locked in his hold. He would only have a few more seconds before the war god broke free. (If… he wanted to break free, that is.)

Shizun stared at them wide-eyed, mouth agape.

"Isn't he so handsome?" Luo Binghe asked, drawing a hand up Liu Qingge's side, before raking his nails down the center of his chest. His shishu shivered. "Look, A-Yuan. Look at how much he *wants* you." His hand curled around the base of Liu Qingge's cock and he stroked it.

A strained sound slid through his shishu's teeth. He stopped fighting with an intent to break away; now the struggle was just for show. He sank partially against Luo Binghe as his knees quaked. He gasped, "Y-You *brat!"*

"A-Yuan…" Luo Binghe cooed, drawing his thumb around the head of his shishu's cock. "Is Liu Qingge pretty?"

Shen Yuan nodded, unable to speak.

The war god caught it and gasped, his entire body jerking in response to that single nod.

"Tell him, A-Yuan. Tell Ming-gege what you think," Luo Binghe demanded, before he bit down on Liu Qingge's neck.

With a startled gasp, Liu Qingge lurched and fucked into Luo Binghe's hand. He cried out, overwhelmed by it all, and dug his teeth into the arm that held him in place.

It smarted, but it was a *good* blunt pain.

"Qingge-" Shen Yuan choked, hand covering his mouth. "Qingge is very…" He swallowed. "Alluring."

His shishu bit down harder, face twisting.

Luo Binghe eased his hold and let go of him. He knew any more would cross a line.

Stumbling forward, Liu Qingge caught himself on the edge of the bed. He gathered his breath, hands braced against the mattress. Then he glanced up. As if magnetized, he fell forward; there Shen Yuan met him and caught his face between his hands. There was an underlying desperation in his shizun as he clung onto the war god, dragging him closer and closer until he was laying back on the bed with Liu Qingge over him. His hands floated about, as if he wasn't quite sure where to put them, until he caught the war god's side and gasped, "Oh, you are *very* naked."

Liu Qingge smiled, his skin red and his eyes soft, "Mn."

"Oh." Shen Yuan gulped. He glanced down between them, and then quickly glanced away. *"Oh."*

Eyes alight with laughter, Liu Qingge kissed his cheek bone, and down the side of his face.

Shen Yuan's hands fell to either side of him.

With a light quirk to his lips, Luo Binghe quickly divested himself of his clothes. He came up behind Liu Qingge and stole one of his shizun's hands and pressed it against his shishu's side. Both of them jumped.

"You can touch him," Luo Binghe told his shizun. "He wants you to."

"Binghe," Liu Qingge muttered, embarrassed.

"O-Oh…" Shen Yuan breathed out. His pale skin flushed a deep red as he considered Luo Binghe's words. He moved. His hands fluttered as they settled on either side of Liu Qingge. Experimentally, he traced his hands up and tentatively squeezed around his pecks.

"Yes," Liu Qingge murmured, and he leaned down to kiss him again. "*Yes."* He bracketed his arms around Shizun's head and kissed him deeply.

Perhaps unbeknownst to him, Shen Yuan parted his thighs and wrapped his legs around the war god, drawing him closer. His body moved, understanding what he wanted before the man even knew himself. He grew bolder as he became less aware, feeling up Liu Qingge's back and guiding him closer. One of hands gripped tightly onto Liu Qingge's hip, and both gasped as their bodies met.

Luo Binghe had a hard time *not* touching himself, and he didn't see a particular reason why not. He rubbed his cock, easing some of the ache, as he watched the two. They were *beautiful,* entwining together, making soft sounds that made him want to rut shamelessly into his own calloused palm.

He must have made a sound because Liu Qingge broke away from Shen Yuan to glance over at him. Both of his beloved looked deliciously wrecked, lips swollen and panting. The tip of Liu Qingge's cock dragged over Shen Yuan's hip, glistening with precum. It was a tantalizing sight.

"Here," Liu Qingge ordered, reaching out to him.

Shen Yuan realized Luo Binghe was naked at that moment. He was out of it enough to openly leer at him.

Luo Binghe felt that gaze like a scorching touch. It dragged along his chest, then latched onto-

Oh.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan gasped. Lust cleared from his expression. With slippery ease, he swept out from underneath the war god and sat up. He reached out a hand.

Wordlessly, Luo Binghe stepped closer until that hand met his chest. Gentle fingers lifted to the pale scar that marred his skin. Shizun's eyes softened with pain and guilt, his lips flattening into a straightened line.

The war god moved away, giving the two space. It let Luo Binghe drift in closer, standing over his shizun who sat at the edge of the bed. With a saddened expression, Shen Yuan quietly murmured, "Why…?"

That scar had always been a gift from his shizun. The meaning of the gift changed over time. At first it had been a reminder – that he hadn't been enough. That he was vile and disgusting. Then it became a promise; that no matter what, he would return to his shizun. He would get answers. He would *prove* to his shizun that he could stand by his side. He would earn the right to be there. That scar reminded him again and again of everything he had lost, and everything he had yet to gain.

At one point, that scar was all he had left of his home.

Now…

Luo Binghe covered his shizun's hand with his own, and he smiled warmly. "Everything Shizun gives this Binghe… he will treasure."

"Binghe," Shen Yuan murmured, and he shook his head. "*This…"*

With the corner of his lip curling into a tender smile, Luo Binghe stepped closer until he stood between his shizun's legs, wrapping him up in one of his arms. He ducked down to press their foreheads together. "Now this Binghe will know everything Shizun sacrificed, just for this Binghe. He will treasure it even more…"

Shaking his head, Shen Yuan tutted under his breath. His eyes glistened. "You…" He met his eyes.

Luo Binghe shifted to kiss him and was delighted when his shizun stretched to meet him. He moved slowly, gently pressing their lips together and focusing on the way his shizun's mouth moved against his. His stomach leaped up against his lungs as heat coiled in his gut. Hands found his bare sides. Shen Yuan breathed in sharply through his nose. His thigh slid against Luo Binghe's.

Taking another step forward, their bodies became flush but their kiss broke. (Perhaps… the only troublesome thing with his shizun being so small.) Luo Binghe reached down and plucked up his shizun.

“B-Binghe!”

He slid onto the bed, taking his shizun with him, so he could kiss him mercilessly into the mattress.

Legs wrapped around his hips – even as grumbles followed him all the way to the middle of the bed. His cock dragged against skin and his body trembled. He *ached,* wanting to rut desperately for any bit of release. Pressing his face against his shizun’s neck, he whined, “Shizun… Shizun-”

“Bing. He!” Shen Yuan snapped. He cruelly grabbed Luo Binghe’s ear and wrenched it. “Not ‘Shizun!’ Not *now!* Not with you-” His eyes followed down the length of his torso, down to his erection. Mouth dropping open, he yelped, “*Absolutely* not!”

Hands shoved at Luo Binghe’s chest. Shen Yuan escaped out from underneath him and scrambled across the bed, legs snapping closed protectively.

Luo Binghe stared at him with a mix of amused shock and tentative hurt.

On the corner of the mattress, Liu Qingge snorted.

“Sh-” Luo Binghe swallowed the word and quickly amended, “...A-Yuan?”

“That *thing* will break me in half!” Shen Yuan protested. He covered his face with a hand and peered out through his fingers, wide eyes on Luo Binghe’s length. “There’s *no* way that’s fitting in me!”

That broke Liu Qingge. He leaned against his hand and started laughing under his breath.

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe whined at him. Then he turned his attention towards his shizun. He felt the *barest* hint of pride; despite his shizun’s protests there was some obvious interest glinting in his eye – the rest of him genuinely abhorred the idea of hurting his shizun (again.) “A-Yuan… doesn’t *need* to receive this Binghe… I can take A-Yuan.” He actually *really* liked that idea.

He also liked a lot of other ideas… like taking *both* his shizun and shishu at once, squeezed between the two of them.

Or Shishu tied down, at the mercy of both Shizun and Luo Binghe…

Or-

He had… *a lot* of ideas…

“No!” Shen Yuan shook his head. “I…” He glanced away, embarrassment coloring his skin down his chest.

No!? Luo Binghe felt rejection like a slap. He sat back on his heels, throat closing. Did… Shizun *not* want any of this? He had never really paid too much attention to his own body, other than recognizing the way others reacted to him. At first he had thought himself ugly as a child, then as he grew others started reacting to him differently.

Though… none had ever seen him *like this* before. Naked, aroused, and *wanting.*

A hand pressed into the middle of his back, and Liu Qingge slid in behind him. His arms wrapped around Luo Binghe and squeezed so tightly it forced air from his lungs. Still keeping that tight hold, he glanced over at Shen Yuan and said, "You don't want to hurt him."

Shen Yuan winced and glanced back over at the two of them. He struggled silently, eyes drifting away to peer up towards the ceiling before dropping back down to the mattress. Instead of answering verbally, he shook his head to say, *No, I don't want to hurt him.*

"...A-Yuan doesn't *need* to 'take' or 'receive' anyone," Liu Qingge told him. He eased his hold on Luo Binghe.

"It's fine," Shen Yuan said, stiffly. He sat up, legs stretching out as he became every bit refined and graceful. His chin lifted and he stared coolly down at them.

"...does A-Yuan want to take or to receive?" Liu Qingge asked.

Shen Yuan's face spasmed. He lifted his chin and tried to calmly say, "I said it was fine, didn't I?"

It… took a little to translate that one. If Luo Binghe was guessing *correctly,* that meant that Shen Yuan did *not* want to take anyone that night, and wanted someone else to penetrate him. "Ming-gege should take Yuan-gege," Luo Binghe murmured. He was grateful for his shishu's quiet assurance, so he reached over and squeezed his thigh and placed a kiss on his cheek.

The war god froze at the suggestion. His eyes widened minutely as he stared at Shen Yuan. Tension rose in his body, breath picking up pace.

Raising his chin, Shen Yuan met his eyes. He nodded. "Okay."

Liu Qingge stopped breathing.

"...this Binghe can not wait," Luo Binghe purred, turning to murmur into his shishu's neck, "to watch Gege perform."

"*Binghe!"* Shen Yuan squawked.

"Brat." Liu Qingge turned to him, kissing him and then harshly biting his lower lip. When he pulled away, his eyes were dark and heady. After one last bite, he slid off the bed to walk to the nightstand. His eyebrows raised as he saw the supplies laid out atop of it. He grabbed what he was familiar with, the lube, and raised an eyebrow at Luo Binghe.

Smiling sheepishly, Luo Binghe shrugged and said, "I brought everything out."

“...when did you…?” Shen Yuan started to ask.

Before his shizun could follow that line of questioning, Luo Binghe distracted him by grabbing him by his heel and dragging him closer. His shizun made a grumbling sound, yet ultimately leaned up to continue kissing him. Luo Binghe dragged him back to the edge of the bed.

Breaking the kiss, he asked, “Can… this Binghe prepare A-Yuan?”

Shen Yuan grew flustered. “...fine.”

“Does that mean…” Luo Binghe sat back, and he dragged his fingers along the lip of his shizun’s undergarments. “This can come off?”

Swallowing, Shen Yuan lifted his hand to cover his face again. He nodded.

Excitement bubbled in Luo Binghe. It took everything in him not to just rip the fabric off. He wanted to take his time. His eyes met Liu Qingge’s and he motioned towards the space behind his shizun.

With a nod, the war god slid back onto the bed, lube in hand, and sat behind Shen Yuan. He reached over and guided a finger along Shen Yuan’s chin, turning his head so he could kiss him. Shen Yuan sank back against him, torso twisting for better leverage.

Before he turned completely, Luo Binghe reached out to touch him. His hands kneaded up his sides. His thumbs traced along his ribs. He squeezed one of Shen Yuan’s pecks and teased his nipples with a little flick from both of his thumbs.

Shen Yuan jolted, his moan swallowed by Liu Qingge’s mouth.

Hungrily, Luo Binghe curled over his shizun to drag his tongue over one of his nipples.

Another sound escaped Shen Yuan and he arched his back. His hands flailed, one reaching up to grasp and claw at Liu Qingge. The other caught onto Luo Binghe’s hair and gripped deliciously tight.

Mercilessly, Luo Binghe wrapped his lips around the nub and sucked.

Shen Yuan cried out, breath hitching.

The sound hit Luo Binghe in his groin. He reached down, palming himself. He had the thinnest thread of restraint, and it was *so* close to breaking.

Grunting, Liu Qingge tightened his grip on Shen Yuan. He kissed him and groaned.

Luo Binghe *loved* this. He loved watching his shizun’s poise slowly come apart. He loved seeing his shishu’s careful control break away bit by bit. He loved that *he* was the one doing it to them.

He bit the flesh next to his shizun's nipple, gently, and trailed down his ribs and sides. Shen Yuan writhed underneath him, thighs rubbing together, as he tried to regain a modicum of his composure. As soon as Luo Binghe left his chest alone, the war god took over squeezing and rubbing. He made it to the lip of his shizun's shorts. He dipped his fingers underneath the waistband.

A wanton sound ripped free from Shen Yuan. His head rolled back, elongating his neck, and he thrust his hips forward.

Luo Binghe lost the ability to breathe. With great care, hands shaking only mildly, he dragged the fabric down. He saw the blushing head of a cock first, and his mouth watered. Precum glistened at the top of a blushing, red head. It took everything in Luo Binghe not just to fall forward and greedily wrap his mouth around his shizun. He forced himself to focus on the task at hand. The shorts slid down pale thighs, past a pair of knees, and then they were off.

Everything silenced as two terribly greedy men drank in the vision that was Shen Yuan, aroused, naked, and positively *wrecked* with passion.

"Beautiful," Liu Qingge murmured into Shen Yuan's ear.

Shizun gasped. He turned to hide his face.

"A-Yuan is *beautiful,"* Luo Binghe murmured appreciatively. The hair around his shizun's cock was neatly trimmed. Every piece of him was so carefully maintained – even details like *this…?* His shizun's cock was pink and thin, resting against his thigh as it twitched.

He leaned down, unable to stop himself from tasting him.

Shen Yuan cried out in shock, unable to muffle it, as his hips rutted into the air and chased his tongue.

It made Luo Binghe feel like a *god.*

"B-Binghe!" Shen Yuan groaned. "M-*Mouth-"*

"This Binghe wants *all* of you, A-Yuan," Luo Binghe whined. "Please, please, *please."* He dropped down onto his knees at the edge of his bed, hooking one of Shen Yuan's legs over his shoulder. He pressed his eyebrows together, bringing tears to his eyes, as he rested his cheek against a pale inner thigh. The smell of Shizun wafted over him, and he wanted to breathe it *all* in. Though he restrained himself, not wanting to push Shen Yuan too far.

"Ah," Shen Yuan breathed, and he shook his head vehemently. "J-Just.. prepare me, Binghe!" His cock was mostly hardened, precum glistening at the top.

Luo Binghe slid closer, using a hand to guide his shizun's other leg open. His legs splayed out, wider and wider, the further Luo Binghe leaned in. He reached down and spread his shizun's cheeks. There he saw his shizun's entrance, tight and pink. Every piece of his shizun was amazing. He leaned in, ready to steal another taste, when a hand caught his hair and wrenched him away.

It was painful, and his cock twitched eagerly.

“Binghe.” Liu Qingge glared at him. “No.”

Panting heavily, Shen Yuan had hidden his face again. They had hardly started, but his shizun was already a mess. His cock was hard and twitching, his stomach shuttering with every breath, and his flesh was mottled with red marks and bruises. Even a few of Luo Binghe’s more gentle marks were like blossoming little roses on his skin.

Luo Binghe *whined.* His erection was heavy, and he wanted nothing more than to take *some* part of Shen Yuan into his mouth and make him fall apart.

“No,” Liu Qingge told him, harshly. “Be respectful.”

The problem was that Luo Binghe wanted to be more than respectful, he wanted to *worship* his shizun. He had never truly thought he would be *here*, with Shen Yuan spread out and naked, and now he was. Swallowing, Luo Binghe nodded. The movement pulled at his scalp and he held back a moan, knowing it would only frustrate his shishu. “Y-Yes, Shishu,” he said, with the utmost sincere respect that he could muster.

The war god frowned at him, eying him like he didn’t believe him.

“*Fuck!”* Shen Yuan snapped, “Just get on with it already!”

“Yes, Shizun!”

The look Shen Yuan gave him could incinerate lesser beings. His expression was sharp and reproachful. “Binghe. If I have to remind you *one* more time-”

Liu Qingge shivered, his eyes falling shut as he pressed a fist to the corner of his mouth.

“-I *will* find something to gag you,” his shizun continued.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, Luo Binghe had to swallow down the surge of *want* that rushed through him. He squeezed his thighs together, panted against his shizun’s bare leg, and palmed himself. He didn’t trust himself not to say “Shizun” again, so he kept his mouth shut and nodded.

Shen Yuan glared at him, as if *knowing* the word sat on his tongue.

Luo Binghe had already nodded – he wouldn’t break his unspoken promise, as much as he wanted to test his shizun. (That would be for *another* time.) Though, because he could not help himself, he reached up and wrapped his hand around the base of his shizun’s cock. He felt him jolt underneath him, legs spasming. “Yes, A-Yuan,” he said, voice rough and strained. “I will be good. Just for you.”

“Oh, my *God,”* Shen Yuan groaned, his hips stuttering. He fell back against Liu Qingge, trying to catch his breath, as he stared up at the ceiling in disbelief. “Oh – *oh.”*

Luo Binghe dragged his hand up his shizun's erection, squeezing the tip. More precum dribbled out and slid over his hand. He resisted the urge to taste it.

"Brat," Liu Qingge accused. He leaned over with the lubricant and held it out to him. "Stop teasing him."

"Yes, Gege," Luo Binghe purred. He pumped his shizun's cock a bit more while he grabbed the bottle with his other hand. Reluctantly, he stopped touching him.

Shen Yuan clung onto Liu Qingge as if he were a lifeline. He had twisted to hide in the war god's embrace, fingers digging into his skin. As he got a little reprieve, he attempted to catch his breath.

They hadn't even *begun* yet.

Luo Binghe poured the oil-like substance over his fingers. He recalled Mu Qingfang's teachings – and even his own experimentation in the shower. He made sure that both Shen Yuan's entrance and his fingers were well coated before he started. With one hand, he guided one of Shen Yuan's legs to fold towards his chest. He caught his shishu's eye and nodded towards it.

Eyes widening, Liu Qingge reached out a hesitant hand. Then he caught onto Shen Yuan's leg, spreading him wider.

A strangled noise left Shen Yuan. He broke out of his hiding to look between the two of them.

Then Luo Binghe started rubbing his entrance with a finger.

Shen Yuan gasped. He hid moments later, again.

"A-Yuan," Luo Binghe said, softly. "Please let me see your face." As he rimmed his shizun's entrance with a finger, he wrapped his other hand around his shizun's cock. He stroked him slow and languidly, waiting for him to relax. "A-Yuan," he continued, "I want to make sure I am not hurting you." He breached into Shen Yuan. His eyebrows raised and he swallowed a pleading whine, shocked by the intoxicating heat. He could only *imagine* what it would be like to penetrate his shizun with his own cock, and to feel that tight heat all around him.

"Ngh..!?" Shen Yuan gasped into Liu Qingge's neck.

The war god somehow managed to keep a firm grasp on his own control. He soothed a hand up and down Shen Yuan's side.

"Touch him again, Ming-gege," Luo Binghe told him. "We need him to relax."

There was a dark look in Liu Qingge's eyes. He managed to make an affirming sound, before he twisted to kiss Shen Yuan.

His shizun was tight, but between both Luo Binghe's administrations and Liu Qingge's distracting touch, he relaxed into a puddle and was completely pliant.

One finger became two. His shizun groaned. He lay splayed out for Luo Binghe, caught in Liu Qingge's arms. His erection leaked. He barely had the wherewithal to think of hiding his face anymore, though he still smothered himself against Liu Qingge.

Luo Binghe was searching for *that spot.* He hadn't quite managed to get it for himself. His eyebrow furrowed in concentration. There had been a few different pleasure points that Mu Qingfang had taught them – the prostrate being one of them. He rocked his fingers into Shen Yuan, curving them and searching.

Then Shen Yuan lurched with a loud, lurid cry. He clamped a hand over his mouth, staring wide-eyed at Luo Binghe, who had frozen.

Inwardly, Luo Binghe smirked in a *very* satisfied and evil fashion. Outwardly, he blinked innocently up at his shizun and worriedly asked, "Did I hurt you, A-Yuan?"

Liu Qingge glared down at him, not tricked for a single second. "Again."

"A-Again!?" Shen Yuan yelped.

"Yes, Shishu," Luo Binghe purred, obediently. Then he plunged his fingers into his shizun, aiming for the same exact spot. He would memorize it – the feel, the texture, the way his shizun clenched around him. He would know this so he would never miss it again.

Shen Yuan lost composure. He dissolved into a mess. He cried out again, losing all strength and falling completely into Liu Qingge's arms.

Without mercy, Luo Binghe continued to fuck him with his fingers. He tightened his grip around the base of his shizun's cock, keeping him in place even as his hips moved and tried to follow him.

It… was intoxicating.

Addicting.

Luo Binghe could spend the rest of the night having his shizun ride his fingers, watching him squirm and moan and *lose* himself.

Though Liu Qingge looked too close to the edge, and he suspected if this played out for too much longer that this night would be done far sooner than he wanted it to be.

When he pulled out his fingers, Shen Yuan *whined.* Seconds later, he slapped a hand over his mouth, appalled.

"F-Fuck," Liu Qingge muttered through his teeth. He leaned down and bit Shen Yuan's shoulder.

"M-mph!" Shizun gasped. His hips twitched. "Q-Qingge!"

Instantly, the war god jerked his mouth away. "Sorry," he panted and quickly kissed the bite. He curled his hands into tight, shaking fists.

“It…” Shen Yuan cringed, “it’s okay. It… felt…” His lips pressed into a line thinner than his own face.

“A-Yuan *liked* it,” Luo Binghe translated. He poured more lubricant over his fingers.

Embarrassed, Shen Yuan looked away from both of them.

Liu Qingge wasn’t quite sure what to do with that information. He stared down at the bite as if waiting for his brain to reset. His face softened as he came to a decision, and he started lavishing Shizun with kisses and tender touches.

With a soft sigh, Shen Yuan sank into the affection, draped like an exquisite tapestry.

Luo Binghe drew his newly coated fingers around his shizun’s entrance, and traced his rim. He watched his expression carefully, waiting until Shen Yuan was relaxed before he pressed in.

Groaning, Shen Yuan closed his eyes and shifted his hips. His lower lip caught between his teeth. It didn’t seem to be from pain – mild discomfort, perhaps. It did not take him long to adjust. Before long, Luo Binghe could pump his fingers in and out.

And not before long, Shen Yuan was clinging onto Liu Qingge and panting, little sounds escaping his tightly sealed lips as Luo Binghe rubbed and teased his prostate.

“Isn’t… isn’t-” Shen Yuan tried to speak, breath hitching. Flustered, he raised his arm to cover his face. “Isn’t that enough?”

It was as close to his shizun saying that he was ready for more. Luo Binghe smiled widely. His stomach leaped in excitement; he *ached.* The image of his shizun riding on his shishu would be burned *forever* in his mind, and it was within grasp.

Luo Binghe slowed down, and eased his fingers out of his shizun. He shifted up off his knees and nodded towards his shishu.

The reality of the situation seemed to sink onto Liu Qingge and he swallowed. He glanced over at Shen Yuan and asked, “Are you sure?”

“Qingge.” Shen Yuan glared at him.

It wasn’t a yes or a no, but it definitely screamed, *Do not make me say it.*

“Sh-” Luo Binghe started, and was immediately pinned down with an even more vicious glare. “*Yuan-gege,”* he amended, “wants Ming-gege. Doesn’t he?”

No one said anything. Both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge stared the thin-faced man down, waiting for his answer. Luo Binghe knew they wouldn’t get one. The more time that passed, the more all three of them would *ache* for another.

But Liu Qingge had too much control to give in first, and his shizun was far too stubborn to-

“Let’s get on with it,” Shen Yuan said. He meant to snap, by the expression on his face, but it came out breathy and wanting.

In that instant, Liu Qingge moved. He grabbed Shen Yuan and guided him back onto the bed. There he slid between his legs, kissing him. His hands groped down Shen Yuan’s sides, momentarily forgetting about the bruising.

Luo Binghe followed them onto the bed, holding the bottle of lubricant in hand. He poured some onto his palm and reached around his shishu, spreading a healthy amount over his cock.

Shocked, Liu Qingge moaned against Shen Yuan’s mouth. His hips stuttered and he fucked into Luo Binghe’s palm.

It was a wet, slick sound that hit Luo Binghe right in his core. He took a few breaths to calm himself, and let go of his shishu so they all wouldn’t spend themselves then and there.

“What the fuck,” Shen Yuan muttered, eyes wide. He covered his mouth with his hand, his eyes simmering with want and *need.*

Luo Binghe was beginning to understand that “what the fuck” meant: *That aroused me quite more than I expected it to.* Or something lofty like that.

“Give it,” Liu Qingge gasped, holding out a hand to Luo Binghe.

It took him a few moments to realize what he wanted. He was a little distracted by the way his shizun’s legs wrapped around the war god’s hips. Luo Binghe stirred and dropped the bottle into the waiting palm.

With a shaky breath, Liu Qingge poured some more lube on his fingers. His hands shook as he reached for Shen Yuan’s entrance.

“Ah,” Shen Yuan murmured, his hips lifting. He realized all at once the position he was in, and he reached out haphazardly until he caught onto a pillow. Then he dragged it over to cover his head.

That seemed like an *awful* idea.

“A-Yuan,” Luo Binghe murmured, and he crawled across the bed closer to him. He tugged at the pillow, attempting to seek out his shizun’s face. “A-Yuan.”

Shen Yuan did not answer, though his hold on the pillow tightened.

“Ming-gege needs to know when you’re ready,” Luo Binghe told him, voice gentle. He knew he could force the pillow away if he had to. “If not… we’re just going to have to-”

“I am *ready!”* Shen Yuan snapped. “Just put it in already!”

Rolling his head back, Liu Qingge closed his eyes. His eyebrows tightened together as he tried to restrain his desire. He clenched his jaw, breathing tightly through his nose.

Luo Binghe watched him closely, the way his cock twitched, and how his hand tightened on Shen Yuan's thigh. His other hand had disappeared between his legs, possibly with his fingers in Shen Yuan.

"How can we know if A-Yuan is ready, though?" Luo Binghe pressed, feeling mischievous. The corner of his lip quirked. He saw how his shizun's own twitching response to being called something so intimately as "A-Yuan." The "gege" was fun to embarrass him – though the other term of address appeared to mean a lot more to him.

The war god, on the other hand…

Luo Binghe looked up at his shishu, palming himself as he said, "Gege, how does A-Yuan feel around your fingers? Doesn't he feel so good? He's so ready for your cock-"

A strained sound left Liu Qingge.

"*Binghe!"* Shen Yuan tore away the pillow to glare at him. "What is with your mouth!?"

"A-Yuan should give me something to fill it with, then," Luo Binghe murmured, mulishly. He glanced down at his shizun's erection.

Shen Yuan stared at him, mouth falling open.

Unable to wait any longer, Liu Qingge shifted closer to Shen Yuan. He braced his hands on the smaller man's hips and lifted him. His breath was short and fast, and he waited with his cock resting against Shen Yuan's entrance.

Breathing in through his nose, Shen Yuan glanced down at him before ultimately tearing his gaze away.

Before he could cover his face again, Luo Binghe leaned down and murmured, "This Binghe is sorry, this Binghe just wanted his A-Yuan to kiss him again. It's been too long, please, A-Yuan-"

"You're-" Shen Yuan started, then his eyes widened as Liu Qingge breached him. His mouth fell open.

Luo Binghe leaned down to capture a kiss. Then he groped at his chest, hoping to relieve any discomfort his shizun might feel. As he broke the kiss, he said, "Touch him, Qingge." Then he wrapped his lips around one of Shen Yuan's nipples and flicked it with his tongue.

"...ngh!" Shen Yuan grit his teeth and he flailed. He accidentally threw his pillow (good) and gripped so tightly onto Luo Binghe's hair that his scalp burned (even better.) "N-No!" He cried out. "S-Stop!"

Surprised, Luo Binghe jerked away from him and sat back on his heels.

Liu Qingge froze.

Shen Yuan sighed, face twisted. He breathed through his nose, settling down, and he covered his head with both of his arms. After he caught his breath, he murmured something *very* quietly.

Tilting his head to one side, Luo Binghe eased down onto the bed next to him. He set a gentle hand on his shizun's chest. "...what was that, A-Yuan?"

Jaw clenched, Shen Yuan muttered, "...if… this… is going to last, *stop* touching me…"

Luo Binghe's eyebrows raised with understanding. He glanced over at his shishu with a big grin. "Shishu's cock feels too good."

"*Binghe!"* Shen Yuan cried out, mortified.

With a heavy sigh, Liu Qingge glared weakly over at Luo Binghe. "Do you *ever* shut up?"

"Gege just looks *so good* between A-Yuan's legs," Luo Binghe purred. He made sure not to touch anywhere sensitive on his shizun as he drew circles around his chest. "How does he feel, Gege? Does A-Yuan-"

A hand clamped over his mouth. Shen Yuan glared furiously at him. "Binghe. If you don't *shut up,* I'm kicking you out of the room."

"A-Yuan," Luo Binghe whined. He brought tears to his eyes and flopped down on top of his shizun, burying his face into his chest. It was greedy and needy, and… he was *allowed to*. That feeling of being *allowed* into his shizun's space…

He wasn't sure he would ever be able to get used to it.

With his head on Shen Yuan's chest, he heard his shizun's breath get caught in his throat as he was jostled. Behind him, Liu Qingge grunted. His head fell forward and he panted, mouth moving as he counted his breaths in a meditative technique.

Luo Binghe had no doubt it felt *amazing* being inside of Shen Yuan. He shifted his hips, feeling his own pulse in his erection, and swallowed. As much as he wanted to reach down and relieve the tension, he wanted this to last more. His eyes squeezed shut, and he listened to his shizun's breath and the quickening tempo of his heartbeat.

A cold hand hesitantly wrapped around his cock. He jolted out of shock, lifting up, and groaned. He glanced down, and saw his shizun's small hand gripping him. The man probably hadn't been exaggerating when he feared being split apart. A single hand didn't even wrap fully around him. Luo Binghe moaned, "A-Yuan, *A-Yuan…"*

Liu Qingge made a strangled noise, his hips rocking forward.

Shocked, Shen Yuan collapsed back against the bed, leg hitching up and bending. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. "How… do you *sound* like that…?" The words were meant to be inaudible, and would have been if Luo Binghe hadn't laid so close to him.

“A-Yuan, your hand feels so good-“

“I will stop,” Shen Yuan said, lifting his hand away. “I won’t even *look* at you.”

Even just the threat made Luo Binghe cry out in fear. He flopped back down, burying his face into his shizun’s chest. “Please, A-Yuan! Please! This Binghe will be good! He will listen to A-Yuan!” His dramatics shifted both his shizun and shishu even more. Both made strained sounds.

“A-Ah… Binghe,” Shen Yuan gulped. “J-Just… be quiet and… I’ll…” He lacked the face to continue that sentence.

Liu Qingge had lost the ability to speak coherently. His eyes were closed, each breath shuttering past his lips.

Unable to help himself, Luo Binghe sat up. As he moved to go *look* at where the two were joined, a cold hand snatched his hip. When he glanced over his shoulder, Shen Yuan was glaring at him again.

“Binghe.”

Caught, Luo Binghe smiled pathetically and said, “This… Binghe wasn’t…”

“Wasn’t what?” Shen Yuan raised an eyebrow.

Liu Qingge rocked his hips experimentally, and slid in further.

Breath stuttering, Shen Yuan groaned. His back arched and he rolled back into Liu Qingge. A lewd, loud cry escaped his shizun, and his grip on Luo Binghe’s hip turned claw-like.

Liu Qingge grunted and he fell forward, squishing one of Shen Yuan’s legs between their bodies, with a single hand braced against the mattress. The other held Shen Yuan’s hips up.

It was *beautiful.* The two of them entwined. His shizun bent, flushed with pleasure, while Liu Qingge was lost somewhere in that same bliss.

“M-M…Move?” Liu Qingge groaned, so close to sounding like he was *begging.* (Another idea to add to the list…) “C-Can… Can I-?”

“Y-Yes!” Shen Yuan choked.

Liu Qingge shuddered, then began to move. He quickly snapped into a rhythm, punctuated by obscene, wet sounds every time his hips thrust. His jaw clenched and his eyebrows tightened together. His entire world became nothing but the feeling of being inside Shizun and fucking into him.

Even then, the war god was *too* methodical. Too in control.

Soft, punched out sounds left Shen Yuan. He clamped his other hand over his mouth, head rolling back. His free leg clamped around Liu Qingge, drawing him closer. Each passing

second he lost more and more of his composure.

They could go further.

Luo Binghe shifted around the bed until he was kneeling behind the war god. He caught his shishu's hips and dug his fingers into his skin.

Moaning, Liu Qingge sat up. A light sheen of sweat coated him. Eyes hazy, he turned his head to steal a kiss.

Luo Binghe pressed their lips together and inched in closer until his cock slid between the war god's ass cheeks. His vision nearly whited out.

The war god let out a surprised, questioning groan.

Words were not happening at that moment. There was no way that Luo Binghe would be able to explain. Sparks of pleasure rained up his body, and his thigh muscles quivered. There wasn't enough lube to make the slide easy or satisfying, but the *friction* was something and it punched the air out of his chest. With a heavy grunt, he reached around to grab onto his shizun and yank his hips up further. Then he lost himself, grinding against skin.

Both of the other men cried out.

As Luo Binghe regained some sense of mind, he grabbed one of his shizun's legs and pulled it up over Liu Qingge's shoulder. His shizun was spread out for them again. He blindly threw out his hands and clutched onto the sheets. His eyes were squeezed shut, his cock furiously red and leaking against his stomach.

"...now," Luo Binghe murmured. "We find it."

With a shaky breath, Liu Qingge nodded. He pulled out, adjusting his angle, and slowly eased back in. It took a few tries, especially with Luo Binge distracting him by biting his shoulder, grinding against him, and playing with his nipples. He helped by shifting his shizun, who watched them with naked passion.

Liu Qingge thrust – and he hit his mark.

A startled cry broke free from Shen Yuan's lips. Even overtaken with pleasure, he was elegant. He stretched out, like a swan, neck rolled back and long with his hands reaching up past his head. Sweat glittered on his skin, and his cheeks were stained red. His short hair was a frizzy mess. Red marks patterned all over his skin; the map of both Liu Qingge's and Luo Binghe's love for him.

Liu Qingge changed tactics. He took over holding Shen Yuan by his hips, bending him to hit that spot time and time again with coordinated thrusts.

All masks dissolved from Shizun. He no longer tried to swallow any sound. He clung onto the sheets as if they might keep him grounded, desperate cries leaving his lips like the serenade of a siren. His hips moved with Liu Qingge, meeting him as he chased his own pleasure.

Leaning forward, Luo Binghe pressed against his shishu. He moved with him, sliding his cock between his legs. His lips latched onto skin, marking and tasting and biting, with his hands groping all of the war god's tight, lean muscles. He squeezed one of his pectorals, and pinched his nipple.

"A-Ah!" Liu Qingge grunted. "Bing. He!"

Hiding a smirk, Luo Binghe rammed his hips into his shishu.

Both his shizun and shishu cried out.

Liu Qingge fell forward, bracing against the mattress. Each breath that escaped his teeth was desperate. His eyebrows tightened together and he said through gritted teeth, "I-I… I'm…"

Draping over him, Luo Binghe bit his earlobe and murmured, "Fill him up, Gege." He dragged his tongue along his neck and nibbled at his skin. Reaching out between them, he wrapped a hand around his shizun's slender cock.

Shen Yuan moaned, tears glistening along his lashes.

"A-Yuan," the war god panted, "A-Yuan."

"A-Ah," Shizun choked through each thrust. His eyes cracked open, seeking out the war god's face. "Qingge," he said – the way someone might say, *I love you.* There was so much tenderness and emotion packed into that single name. It said everything that Shen Yuan couldn't.

Liu Qingge captured his mouth with his own. The two kissed, sloppily and desperate. *I love you,* they said without saying it. *I love you.* They were a mess of emotions, simplified by the simplicity of sex and pleasure. They were losing themselves. Liu Qingge barely held on. The rhythm of his hips became discordant. He tried to say something between the kisses, struggling to form any sort of sound that wasn't a groan or a grunt. Then all of his muscles tightened, his breath hitched, and he let out a deep moan as he finished.

Braced over both of them, Luo Binghe kept stroking his shizun. Some leftover lube on his palm helped as Liu Qingge lost control of his limbs and he collapsed atop Shizun. He ground into Liu Qingge from behind, his length rubbing against the war god's inner thigh. It wasn't enough to chase his *own* climax, but it was enough to ease some of the tension that tightened in his lower gut.

With a high-pitched sound, Shen Yuan tightened his legs around Liu Qingge. He rutted into Luo Binghe's hand, panting.

Liu Qingge, who was now becoming oversensitive, hissed between his teeth. He regained just enough awareness to move and help his shixiong along. His mouth sloppily moved over Shen Yuan's neck and along his collar bones. He didn't make it in time to the man's chest.

Crying out, Shen Yuan writhed underneath the two of them. He came.

The results of his climax spilled over his stomach, and coated Luo Binghe's hand. He continued to stroke his shizun, chasing the high, until Shen Yuan stopped rocking into his palm and his face pinched in discomfort.

Luo Binghe let go and sat back. He felt airy and light, as if a balloon was swelling inside of his chest and he might just float away. He couldn't decide if he wanted to sit back and grin like a fool or burst into tears. His throat clogged and suggested the latter. He swallowed.

In front of him, Liu Qingge flopped onto the bed beside Shen Yuan. He drew the other man closer to him, trailing touches up and down his sides and kissing him languidly.

Shizun turned to him, clinging onto him, as he pressed into the affection.

This… had been everything Luo Binghe had ever wanted. He never expected Liu Qingge to be a part of that equation, but now that he was Luo Binghe could not envision anything else.

And… both his shizun and shishu loved him.

Despite him being needy, greedy, and selfish. Despite being part demon. Despite all the mistakes he had made.

His shizun had never wanted to throw him away, and his shishu protected him.

Luo Binghe sat back on his heels and tried to quietly deal with his bursting emotions. It seemed that even if he was *not* a half-demon and tied to Xin Mo, his emotions were all over the place. He took in a breath that was slightly too loud and a little too wet.

Both Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan immediately looked at him.

Quickly, his shizun parted from Liu Qingge and sat up. He reached out his hands to Luo Binghe, tutting, "What is this? What's going on?"

A quiet smile of understanding quirked the corner of Liu Qingge's lips. He pushed up to slide in next to Luo Binghe, wrapping an arm around his waist. He tugged him closer and buried his face into his neck.

"Apologizing," Luo Binghe said, breath hitching, "to Shizun and Shishu, this… this Binghe is just very happy."

Face softening, Shen Yuan pinched his cheek and said, "What did I say? What is this 'Shizun' nonsense again?"

Luo Binghe leaned forward until his forehead rested against his shizun's. "I love you, A-Yuan," he whispered. "I love you."

"A-Ah…" Shen Yuan murmured. He held onto his face with both hands and placed a hesitant kiss on his lips.

When he pulled away, Luo Binghe turned and murmured to Liu Qingge, "I love you, too, A-Bo."

Liu Qingge's eyes widened slightly. His cheeks colored, and he shook his head with fondness flooding his eyes. He kissed Luo Binghe deeply, tugging him closer until he was flush against him.

"Ah…"

Upon hearing Shen Yuan's thoughtful sound, the two parted. Luo Binghe gave him one last kiss before his eyes slid to his shizun. Shen Yuan was flustered, arms crossed, with his fingers tapping against his biceps. He pressed his lips into a thin line and said, "Binghe didn't…"

Oh. Luo Binghe connected what his shizun had meant to say: he hadn't finished. He smiled. "That's alright-"

"No," Liu Qinnge murmured against his skin. "Our turn."

A delightful shiver ran up Luo Binghe's spine at the thought of *both* of his loves doting on him.

At the same time, a dark voice whispered in the back of his mind. He felt a trickle of guilt and uncertainty. How could he ask *so much* of either of them? This had been enough. Being with them like this had been *enough.* It was more than he had ever hoped for.

Before he could say anything else, Shen Yuan made a move. He had silently agreed with his shidi and reached his hands out in front of him. He hesitated for half a heartbeat. Then he squared his jaw and wrapped both hands around Luo Binghe's softening erection.

Surprised, Luo Binghe gasped. Cold, thin fingers gripped him. Disbelief swarmed his mind like a cloud. His shizun was touching him. His shizun was going to rub his cock. His shizun-

Heat scorched up his back as a body slid in behind him. Liu Qingge trapped him in a merciless hold, perhaps revenge for earlier, and started teasing him with harsh bites and light touches.

Luo Binghe's head fell back, resting on his shishu's shoulder, and he let out a whine.

"Fuck," Shen Yuan murmured.

Lips pressed to his cheek and followed a line behind his ear and down his neck. Teeth dug into his skin.

Breath hitching, Luo Binghe moaned. Words bubbled up his throat, and he bit his lower lip to stop them from spilling out.

Shizun, Shizun, your hands feel so good. I love you so much. Shizun please. Please, I need you. Shishu, touch me more. More. Bruise me. Leave your mark. Let me remember this moment forever. Please.

There was a thoughtful sound from Shen Yuan and movement in front of Luo Binghe but he couldn't open his eyes — not with Liu Qingge feeling up his chest and latching onto his

neck, nor with Shen Yuan's hands on his-

Something wet and hot flicked over the head of his cock.

Luo Binghe groaned loudly. His eyes snapped open.

Before him, bent down over his erection, was his shizun with his tongue experimentally running along the slit of his-

"Sh-Shizun!" Luo Binghe shouted, overcome.

With a disgruntled frown, Shen Yuan glared up at him. He made a breathtaking picture, covered in lovemarks with his hair ruffled. A pink blush danced across his cheeks.

Unable to form coherent words, Luo Binghe whined. His hips rocked on their own. Every single movement sent cascading fireworks up his spine, tingling all over his skin. He felt as if he was burning alive. "P-Please," he breathed. "Please. Please. *Please."*

With the barest hint of a smile, Shizun huffed. Then he tried his tongue again.

Oh. Luo Binghe felt it all at once — the telltale signs of the knots in his core and the prickling in his muscles. He was *close.* Really, the moment since Liu Qingge's pants hit the ground he had been *close.*

"Sh-Shizun," Luo Binghe stammered, and he reached out to push his head back. "Shizun-"

"*Binghe*," Shen Yuan snapped, hands tightening around his cock. "What did I *say?!* No-"

Luo Binghe came. With a cry, he fucked into his shizun's hands. He fell back, chasing his climax. There was a string of incoherent words that rained from his lips. He didn't pay attention to them, too lost in his ecstasy. One pair of hands teased and played with his chest, another wrapped tight around his cock. He thrust past the overstimulation, until his knees weakened and he was flinching at even just the slightest breath. As his muscles quivered and gave out, he fell back into someone's arms, satisfied.

Strong arms moved him around until lips pressed against his. He felt the curve of a smile in the kiss. "Binghe," Liu Qingge murmured. "Us, too."

Luo Binghe wasn't *quite* sure what his shishu was referring to – he didn't have the mind to recall what he had been saying *at all*. He cracked his eyes open, staring in the other man's eyes. He smiled lightly. Those eyes told him he was loved. *Us, too.*

As in…

We love you too…?

Then he realized what had just happened. He had been trying to warn his shizun to move away – because he had been about to-

"A-Yuan…!"

His mouth dried.

Sitting back, Shen Yuan stared down at his hands. He didn't necessarily look upset, just curious. There, all over his face and his hands, was Luo Binghe's come. He reached up and poked at what had spilled on his face. There was a blatant look of disbelief as he glanced up at the other two.

"...fuck," Liu Qingge muttered. He eased forward, catching Shen Yuan's chin. He turned his face from side to side, heat burning in his eyes.

Shen Yuan raised an eyebrow at the expression on his face. He stubbornly mumbled, "I am too tired for another round.

Laughter glittering in his eyes, Liu Qingge nodded. "Mn."

"A-Yuan is…" Luo Binghe swallowed his next words. There was something so indescribably alluring to seeing his shizun covered in his own come – though he would never dare say those words aloud. Not to Shizun. (Not… yet, at least.) He resisted the urge to clean up his shizing with his own tongue and slid off the bed. His knees wobbled. Once he managed to chase away the last fragments of weakness in his limbs, he said, "This Binghe will grab some things to clean up."

Waving a hand, Shen Yuan shook his head. "I'll shower," he told them, and then yawned. He crawled to the edge of the bed and paused as he stared down at the floor. He considered the ground, as if wondering if he could bear his own weight.

"...can… this Binghe join you…?" Luo Binghe asked. His question had two secret motivations: one was to tend to his shizun in the shower and the other was to *see* his shizun in the shower. His throat tightened and he wondered if he was being too needy.

Thoughtfully, Shen Yuan considered him. His skin flushed a deep red. Then he nodded. Glancing over his shoulder, he raised an eyebrow at Liu Qingge. "Would… Qingge like to join, as well?"

Liu Qingge's mouth opened, and shut. He crossed his arms and glared down at the bed, head cocked to the side. His hands curled into fists. After a few quiet moments of indecision, his shoulders relaxed and he nodded.

"I'll go heat up the water," Luo Binghe offered.

"Thanks, Binghe," Shen Yuan said, smiling up at him.

Liu Qingge got off the bed and held out a hand to Shen Yuan, who took it with little complaint. He had to carefully unfold his legs, wincing only slightly.

As Luo Binghe left the room to go turn on the shower, he heard his shizun grumble, "This is a *different* world, you two. Haven't you heard of 'refractory periods?' We *better* not get distracted in there…"

The three of them showered.

Unfortunately for Shen Yuan, they got *extremely* distracted.

Luckily, it didn’t seem like there was a limit to the amount of hot water the shower had.

At the very least, all three of them ended up both extremely satisfied and worn out...

Chapter End Notes

Summary: The three men finally spend a night together! Shen Yuan keeps breaking Luo Binghe's expectations and initiating some things. At some point, Luo Binghe takes off his shirt and Shen Yuan sees that he kept the scar on his chest (from the Endless Abyss) and both reflect on it. Luo Binghe tells him that he'll treasure anything that his shizun gives him.

At the end, once Luo Binghe reaches his own (fireworks going off visuals), he says a lot of things that are never explicitly outlined, but Liu Qingge kisses him and assures him, "Us, too."

Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations!

SY, the entire chapter: oh my god both of these men are so beautiful please don't come, please don't come, please don't-

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

About 5,500 words, which is roughly a 23 min reading time.

Get ready for a bunch of indulgent fluff... enjoy! <3

No content warnings for this chapter!

It was a small sound that woke Liu Qingge up. He cracked his eyes open just as the morning light spilled in through the opening shades. His head rolled back as he stared at the strange device. By the tint of the sky, he had slept in quite a bit. The corner of his lip quirked. Somehow he had ended up in the middle of the bed again. Luo Binghe curled up at his side, face buried in his shoulder, with his curls splayed out all around him. A few stray curls tickled his skin.

On his other side, Shen Yuan practically lay on top of him. His cheek was plastered against Liu Qingge's chest, and one of his hands had sneaked underneath Liu Qingge's shirt to rest somewhere above his heart.

Liu Qingge only had one free arm – the other was trapped and slightly numb underneath the half-demon. He drew his free hand over Shen Yuan's hair, then down his spine. He felt as if he had woken to a dream. Somehow, he was *allowed* this. He was allowed to indulge, to *love* these two idiots.

And indulge they did. Shen Yuan had *quite* a large shower. (At least Liu Qingge thought it was large. Perhaps it was just normal for this world.) All three very easily fit; and there were multiple shower heads, some that could even extend from the wall which Luo Binghe had used… creatively.

They had spent quite a bit of time there.

Some of his muscles, ones that he *obviously* hadn't used to that capacity before, were sore today. It was gratifying and also a bit embarrassing.

Luo Binghe stirred. Dark, hazy eyes cracked open and stared at nothing. Sleep still clung to him, as if he were standing at the border of wakefulness.

Reaching over, Liu Qingge ran his fingers through the half-demon's hair. Rather than sending Luo Binghe back to sleep, the motion roused him. He stretched out, a sleepy smile curling his lips, and he pressed against the touch. His head tilted back and he smiled up at Liu Qingge. Naked adoration softened his expression, and he sleepily rumbled, "Good morning."

That deep, rough voice did things to Liu Qingge – things he could *never* admit or else the brat would use it against him. He trailed his fingers along Luo Binghe's cheek and made a sound in greeting. It was too early to make real words.

Luo Binghe grinned. He slipped closer and set his cheek against Liu Qingge's shoulder, turning his gooey gaze to his shizun. He reached out a hesitant hand, and it hovered just short of Shen Yuan's face. After a few beats of indecision, he pressed forward and pushed some hair off of his shizun's forehead.

A small, grumbly sound rumbled from Shen Yuan. He curled tighter, legs and arms tightening around Liu Qingge, before he relaxed back into slumber.

"I love him," Luo Binghe said.

"Mn."

"I really do," he added, turning his eyes up to Liu Qingge. "Does it feel the same for you? As if everything inside you might burst, and it hurts, yet it also feels… like home?"

It was an embarrassing topic. Liu Qingge's skin heated. He carefully laid his arm back down, tucking around Shen Yuan with his hand resting on his hip.

Luo Binghe smiled at him fondly. "Is Qingge still too flustered to talk about feelings?"

"Brat," Liu Qingge answered, voice crackly. Despite him being the least vocal of the three last night, his throat was rather sore. It was still too early for words. His morning routine usually meant he didn't have to use words until his disciples found him well after the sun had risen and it was nearing time for a second meal.

With an airy laugh, Luo Binghe pushed himself up. He shifted off of Liu Qingge's arm and braced his forearm next to Liu Qingge's ear. Lips quirked deviously, the half-demon bore all of his attention down on him. Then he trapped Liu Qingge against the mattress, enveloping him with kisses and tender, sweet words that nearly unraveled him.

Qingge is so pretty.

This Binghe loves his A-Bo.

Does A-Bo know how handsome he is, when he is so sleepy?

Gege, I love you.

It was…

…too early…!

By the time Luo Binghe finally released him, his brain was buzzing and he felt as if his head might pop off his shoulders. The damned brat had gotten a *lot* better at kissing. And he knew it. He wore a satisfied smirk as he lay back on his side, head propped up by a hand.

Jaw set, Liu Qingge leaned forward and bit the half-demon. There was nothing else he could do.

Luo Binghe laughed airily against his skin, grinning as he chased Liu Qingge back against the pillow, and kissed him even more.

Then they settled back down and talked about nothing.

Really, it was Luo Binghe who did most of the talking. He grabbed Liu Qingge's hand, the one closest to him, and started tracing the lines on his palm and then the veins down his forearm. He asked about nighthunts and quickly realized he wasn't going to get much for answers, so he turned it around and started sharing some of his own experiences.

Liu Qingge hadn't ever really… had this before.

There was his sister, though she wasn't a talker and the two often shared quiet company. It wasn't as if they were *always* silent; Liu Qingge had his interests and his sister had hers. Sometimes they traded in listening to the other excitedly prattle on.

But even then, he didn't tend to make *idle* conversation.

It was easy with both Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan. Neither *needed* someone to actively participate in their conversation. Both just wanted to share what their minds were focused on. Liu Qingge could only guess that it was a direct line of their thoughts to their mouths.

He reveled in it.

Luo Binghe was describing a nighthunt, eagerly gushing about his shizun and how awe-inspiring he had been, going against a dangerous beast. "It was like he glowed in the moonlight, Shishu," he said, voice full of adoration. "He moved so gracefully too, pulling Ning Yingying out of danger and slicing off one of the beast's limbs in the same motion. Acid blood sprayed *everywhere,* but not a single drop touched Shizun!"

A soft sound escaped Shen Yuan. His eyes cracked open and both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe held their breaths. There was a flash of guilt in the half-demon's eyes; he hadn't meant to wake his shizun, but had gotten too wrapped up in his story.

Bleary eyes slid to Luo Binghe. Shen Yuan shifted, adjusting how he lay. One of his legs hooked around Liu Qingge's and he used it to anchor himself as he rolled more onto his stomach. His cheek pressed against Liu Qingge's chest. Then he pressed his nose against him and he-

He breathed in.

A resounding *thud* echoed in Liu Qingge's ears from his own heartbeat. His fingers twitched.

Shen Yuan's hand above his heart twitched. Struggling only for a few quiet moments, the small man extracted it from underneath the shirt. He reached out and gently held the side of Luo Binghe's face. A tired smile dawned across Shen Yuan's lips as he stared adoringly towards his disciple.

"Good morning, Shizun," Luo Binghe murmured, blossoming underneath the tender touch.

Shen Yuan made a sound. His new position essentially had him completely atop of Liu Qingge and freed his other arm. He used it to wrap Liu Qingge up like a vine. Then he snuggled his face back into Liu Qingge's chest.

After a few moments, Shen Yuan let out another sleepy sound. He rolled his head to the side, looking moments away from falling back asleep. "…mn…" he hummed. His hand reached out again, and he clumsily dragged a hand over Luo Binghe's hair. His voice came out rough and in a whisper, as if he hadn't really meant to say the words at all:

"...so this is what love feels like?"

He didn't seem to expect an answer, eyes falling shut. Not before long, he resumed his quiet, rumbly snores.

Liu Qingge didn't dare to breathe. He stared up at the ceiling, feeling a strange reaction rush through him. His throat clenched, and the back of his eyes prickled.

...so this is what love feels like.

He wanted to wake Shen Yuan and kiss him and tell him that he loved him too – except that he knew that the words would catch in his throat. He *desperately* wanted to say it. He didn't know *why* he couldn't, and it was irritating. He *knew* he loved them.

The words just… wouldn't come out.

(He… told his sister he loved her, didn't he?

Why couldn't he remember the last time he told her…?)

Throat tight, he wrapped his arm tightly around Shen Yuan's waist and held him securely against his chest.

"…I love him so much," Luo Binghe whispered. He leaned forward and pressed his nose into the crown of Shen Yuan's head, effectively squishing all the air from Liu Qingge's lungs.

Not that he minded. His eyes fell shut, and he sank back against his pillow. *I love them,* he thought. *I love them both beyond words.* He understood what Luo Binghe had meant earlier – loving someone so much that it feels as if all of his insides were fighting to break out through his ribs. His heart felt so swollen and full and *bursting.* It hurt in a way that felt *good.* It… also, unfortunately, made him want to bite things.

He resisted the urge, and instead laid a hand over Luo Binghe's back, holding both pieces of his heart close.

One day, he would be brave enough to say the words aloud.

There was only so much time that Liu Qingge could lay in bed before his mind started rebelling. He loved both Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan – but he couldn't help it. It was boring. With the help of Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge escaped his shixiong's hold and went out into the living room to exercise. His abs were sore. His thighs were sore. His hips were sore. His *ass* was sore. He eventually broke out of his sword forms to focus on stretches.

In the kitchen, Luo Binghe moved back and forth in a complex dance as he prepared their breakfast. He pulled fresh produce from the fridge and snatched spices out of shelves, while also timing the brew for tea. He had a jubilant pep to his step, smile staining his lips, as he hummed and moved about.

Liu Qingge watched him out of the corner of his eye and found that the half-demon's happiness was contagious. A smile plucked at the edges of his own lips.

Not before long, the apartment was filled with the alluring scent of Luo Binghe's cooking. Liu Qingge usually had very little appetite in the morning, and more often than not just portioned food to fuel him for the day. At this point, he was going to get spoiled. How was he supposed to go on night hunts now, with only rations to sustain him?

He stretched up towards the ceiling, then folded over to his toes. The backs of his thighs burned, and he felt the stiffness of his muscles loosening.

"That's a good view, Gege," Luo Binghe called.

Liu Qingge rolled his eyes and shook his head. Embarrassment filled his cheeks, but he did not break form.

The door to the bedroom creaked open. A pair of pale white feet padded out and trekked towards the table. Liu Qingge peered through a curtain of hair and realized that… Shen Yuan had not put on pants. He rose out of his stretch and watched as the smaller man rubbed sleep from his eyes and plopped down onto a chair at the table.

His head dropped into his arms.

"Good morning, Shizun," Luo Binghe called, softly.

Shen Yuan lifted a hand and waved it his way. He wore a large sweatshirt that pooled over his hands. He must have plucked something randomly from the closet, not realizing that Luo Binghe had rearranged all their clothes.

Curious, Liu Qingge glanced into the bedroom. Amused, he raised an eyebrow. A pair of sweatpants lay abandoned on the ground, as if Shen Yuan had attempted to pull them on and gave up when he realized they were too large. A surge of adoration flooded into his lungs,

and he felt like he wouldn't be able to breathe until he squeezed Shen Yuan in his arms. He was already across the room, stepping up beside his shixiong's chair, before he realized it might be too early to break anyone's ribs and managed to stop himself short of the chair.

Shen Yuan blinked up at him, sleep clinging onto the corners of his eyes. "...morning."

Fingers twitching at his sides, Liu Qingge wanted to kiss him. He hesitated for too long, and realized he was just staring down at his shixiong.

"It's too early," Shen Yuan said, agreeing with only himself as he yawned behind a hand.

It… was very late in the day, actually.

Luo Binghe approached the table with two steaming cups of tea. He set one down in front of his shizun, and another where Liu Qingge usually sat. He made his way around the table to steal a kiss from his shizun, who flustered and made a small sound.

When Luo Binghe made it to Liu Qingge, he yanked him close by his hip and kissed him harshly.

It… was on purpose. The brat knew how to kiss better at this point. Liu Qingge made a grunt of annoyance.

As Luo Binghe left, he grabbed a handful of Liu Qingge's ass.

"Shameless…!" Liu Qingge reeled on him and chased him back to the kitchen, the half-demon laughing delightedly the entire way.

To enact his revenge, Liu Qingge set the table. The brat whined the entire time, and pouted when all three finally sat to eat. "You're a little shit," Liu Qingge told him, and prodded him with his foot under the table.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe whined. "Shishu is being mean…"

"Mn." Shen Yuan stared down at his food, deciding what he should dig into first. "Binghe's being a little shit."

Liu Qingge nearly dropped his chopsticks. He laughed under his breath. There were very few times in the past where Liu Qingge had caught his shixiong swearing. As more of the man's masks came down, the less he worried about his image and the more he was himself. It was heartwarming.

And funny.

With a pout that could rival a child, Luo Binghe stared forlornly into his food. His eyes glittered with tears.

"...Binghe," Shen Yuan said with a sigh, folding immediately.

"Don't," Liu Qingge told him, knowing he would anyway.

Leaning across the table, Shen Yuan ran his hand over Luo Binghe's cheek. "What is this, ah? Wearing such a face in front of a delicious looking meal."

"...Shizun should kiss me to make it better," Luo Binghe mumbled, dejectedly.

Shen Yuan froze, and his entire face instantly washed a bright red. "Binghe!"

Amused, Liu Qingge dug into his meal. He shook his head as Shen Yuan sputtered and tried to fight against Luo Binghe's big, starry eyes. Just as his shixiong was about to give in, there was a jarring sound from the living room.

Sitting up straight, Shen Yuan stared towards it. The hold on his chopsticks tightened, his skin paling, as he recognized what it was. "My sister's calling." He stared towards the sound, but did not move.

Liu Qingge was out of his seat in an instant. He found the source of the noise: Shen Yuan's phone long forgotten on one of the sidetables. Plucking it into his hand, he returned to the table and set it between himself and Shen Yuan.

A distant, glacial mask slid over Shen Yuan's face as he stared down at his phone. It was what gave away his fear. He had abandoned his chopsticks on the table, with his hands folded in his lap.

Heart heavy, Liu Qingge understood that fear. He wasn't a perfect brother. More than once, his sister and him had argued viciously. Neither had to say much to know another's vulnerable points.

It was reaching back out after that was the hardest.

"I can answer," Liu Qingge told him.

Shen Yuan blinked down at the phone. When he met his gaze, his mask slid away. His eyebrows folded together and his eyes started to shimmer. He nodded.

With a deep breath, Liu Qingge did something he did not want to do: he answered the phone. Anxiety squirreled up into his lungs and stiffened his muscles. "Hello."

"Ahhh… hi." The phone said in reply to him. "Which one are you?"

"Liu Qingge."

Luo Binghe twitched and tried to wrestle control of his expression.

That's when Liu Qingge realized his mistake. This was why he wasn't a liar. He was a *bad* liar. "Mingbo," he corrected. He could tell by the silence on the phone, and by the way Luo Binghe rubbed his face with his hands, that it was too late. His face burned.

"...well, Liu-ge. Is my san-ge there?"

"He is," Liu Qingge said, glancing down at him.

Shen Yuan watched him with a wary expression. He didn't look ready to reach out for the phone yet. He looked small.

"...is he having a bad day?"

Liu Qingge considered the question and shook his head. "No." He thought he should provide more than just that, and he had to think of what he *could* say. Finally, he settled on a partial truth, "We were eating."

"Oh." A pause. "...is he… just, like, watching this really awkward exchange right now while stuffing his face?"

Mouth tugging slightly, Liu Qingge snorted. "Mn."

"So, he's being a scaredy cat. Whatever. Has he been ignoring my calls?"

"Not on purpose," Liu Qingge told her. "He just got up."

"...it's the afternoon. This man has *guests!* San-ge!"

"Not his fault," Liu Qingge started, then by the grace of the gods he did *not* finish that sentence.

Well, by the grace of Luo Binghe who swung in and snatched the phone away from him. "Shen-mei!" He said, lifting his voice into a welcoming tone. "Hello!"

Liu Qingge dropped his head into a hand and rubbed his face. He was grateful the phone was no longer his problem. As he gathered himself, he slid his chair closer to Shen Yuan until he could grab one of his hands.

Fingers dug into the palm of his hand. Shen Yuan breathed in through his nose and stayed silent, watching Luo Binghe interact with his sister.

Somehow… it *wasn't* awkward with Luo Binghe. He excitedly told her about the movie they had watched, and asked if she had seen it.

Leaning in, Liu Qingge squeezed Shen Yuan's hand. "Nothing you say will make it worse."

Shen Yuan closed his eyes and nodded.

"She still loves you."

He nodded again, lips trembling slightly.

"You're not alone."

With a weak breath, Shen Yuan nodded again. He leaned forward. Liu Qingge slid his chair closer to catch him, and he wrapped an arm around his waist. He pressed his lips to the top of his head and held him close. His hand ran up and down Shen Yuan's side.

The two of them stayed there while Luo Binghe excitedly chatted away on the phone. He dragged his own chair closer and around the table until his legs were flush with his shizun's. With an elbow against the table and the phone held between his shoulder and ear, he grabbed his shizun's other hand and threaded their fingers together. "I fell asleep before the end," he lied. "Yuan-gege took some pictures of me…"

They were close enough to hear Shen Huiying's laugh. "He does that."

Luo Binghe searched his shizun's expression and raised a questioning eyebrow.

With a nod, Shen Yuan tugged his hand out of Luo Binghe's hold and lifted it to take the phone.

"Okay, I suppose I should finally let you talk to your brother," Luo Binghe said, as if he wasn't buying time for his shizun to compose himself.

"It was nice talking with you, Luo-ge! You have to finish the movie. The handler shows up at the end and she's *so* hot!"

"I will," he said, smiling. Then he handed the phone over.

Shen Yuan braced himself and took it. He raised it up to his ear. "Hey Huiying." He closed his eyes and hid in Liu Qingge's arms. Luo Binghe slid off his chair and wrapped his arms around his shizun, resting his head in his lap.

The next few minutes was an extremely stilted conversation. As the conversation went on, Shen Yuan freed his other hand to thread it through his disciple's hair. He struggled to untie it with one hand, and Liu Qingge reached down to help him. Soon, there was a pile of curls getting frizzier and frizzier by the second, the more Shen Yuan nervously dragged his fingers through them.

The two siblings talked about… nothing, really.

Preliminary health questions, then questions about what they were currently up to. Then:

"Why were you up so late anyways? You're not reading that stupid webnovel when you have guests, are you?"

Shen Yuan's ears turned pink. "No! I haven't read *anything,* actually, thank you! I've been a good host! We just watched-" His voice died. He flustered as he forgot the name of the movie – a rare show for the Qing Jing peak lord who often miraculously remembered the names of obscure creatures.

"Oh, my *God.* No way. *No way!* Right after you got out of the hospital!?"

"Stop! Shut up!" Shen Yuan snapped into the phone.

"Saaaaaan-ge!?"

"I'm hanging up."

There was some muffled laughter and a teasing voice on the other end.

After that, the conversation got easier. Time passed slowly. The food cooled, and none of them made a sound of complaint. Liu Qingge continued to sooth a hand up and down Shen Yuan's side with his nose buried in his hair. At their feet, Luo Binghe appeared to have fallen asleep. Eventually, Shen Yuan said, "In an hour, we can meet at that boba shop near me." He swallowed. "…we… should talk."

Then he was silent for a while.

There was a muffled response.

"Yeah, brat," he said with forced lightness. "Of course I'm buying."

Another pause.

"…I'll see you in an hour then, Ying-mei." Shen Yuan added, "Love you. Bye." He hung up the phone and straightened up out of Liu Qingge's arms. He set the phone aside and sighed. "Sorry. The food. You guys could have…"

"It's okay, A-Yuan," Luo Binghe said, groggily.

Liu Qingge snorted. "Mn. Binghe needed a nap."

A sleepy whine escaped Luo Binghe. He buried his face into Shen Yuan's bare thigh.

The smile on Shen Yuan's face was only half genuine. He was distracted by his thoughts; enough that he didn't even react to his disciple's shamelessness.

Liu Qingge hesitated. He wondered if he could reach out for him again. His throat clogged. Sometimes he himself needed space – his mind rebelled against *touch.* Could Shen Yuan need some space right now as well? Or… would it be alright… to touch him again?

(What were the *rules…?)*

He wanted to.

It had been nice before, holding his love close.

His hands settled in his lap, and he sat in choked silence. *I love you,* he wanted to say. He wanted to pull both of his beloved close and murmur that to them. That possibility seemed so far away.

He couldn't even bring himself to reach out to Shen Yuan again.

"I'm… going to tell her the truth," Shen Yuan said. He raised his head as if he hadn't realized that was what he was going to say until it fell out of his mouth. His jaw set with his resolve, and he clarified, "I am going to tell her everything."

"...mn," Liu Qingge nodded. If he was in a similar situation, he would tell Mingyan.

Shen Yuan turned to look at him, and then he dropped his gaze down to Luo Binghe. "...is that alright, Binghe?"

"Yes," Luo Binghe answered, stirring from his drowsiness. His face squished in confusion. "Of course! Shizun doesn't need permission from this disciple."

"It's…" Shen Yuan trailed off as he tried to think of an explanation.

"…because of the book?" Liu Qingge guessed. "It's about Binghe." That was why Shen Yuan had not asked for his own permission — according to the book, Liu Qingge should have died years ago. He was just a sad footnote in his sister's past.

"Shizun doesn't need my permission," Luo Binghe said. "This disciple understands."

"…don't just agree with me because you feel that you have to," Shen Yuan said with a wince.

"There's nothing that-"

"Binghe." Shen Yuan pushed on his shoulders until his disciple was upright. "You said that you wanted to earn the right to stand by my side."

Luo Binghe stared up at him in wonder and nodded.

"You wanted to be my equal."

Luo Binghe's eyes widened. He started to shake his head and say, "This disciple-"

"*Binghe."* Shen Yuan sternly squeezed his shoulders. "You never had to *'earn'* anything. It was *always* your right to choose who you wanted to stand beside."

Silence overtook Luo Binghe. His mouth opened. Then closed. His eyes glistened.

"You are an *emperor,"* Shen Yuan insisted. "You can have an opinion, *especially* if it disagrees with mine. That's okay. I…" He lost his bravado, and he turned his head away as his skin flushed. "…no matter… what, how… this master feels… That *won't* change just because you disagreed with him."

"A-Yuan…" Luo Binghe breathed. His tears spilled over and he stole one of his shizun's hands to nuzzle into it.

"Do you understand?" Shen Yuan pinned him down with another glare.

"Yes," Luo Binghe said, nodding.

"Okay. So is it okay that I tell my sister the truth?" Shen Yuan asked.

"Yes."

Shen Yuan narrowed his eyes.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe said, leaning forward to cling onto him. “I love you. I trust you. I agree that it’s important that she knows you’re not just… *dying.”* He choked on the word. He let out a shaky breath. “She deserves to know you’re living on in another life, and that you’re cherished and you are loved and you’re powerful and *incredible-“*

“B-Binghe,” Shen Yuan protested, embarrassed.

“That *book* is not *me,”* Luo Binghe continued. “I don’t care who reads it or knows of it. It doesn’t matter to me. *You* matter to me. And your family matters so much to you, which means they matter just as much to me.” He reached up to cup his shizun’s face. “When we go home, I don’t want you to leave with any regrets.”

Shen Yuan’s shoulders sank. “Binghe,” he said, softly. With Luo Binghe’s guidance, he slid off the chair to wrap Luo Binghe up in his arms. The two became a knot, holding onto another fiercely.

Something clogged Liu Qingge’s throat. He… knew he could drag himself across the floor and join them. It was something he *could* do. Something kept him tied to the chair. His hands gripped the fabric of his pants. He wanted to join them.

He did not.

His stomach twisted — he realized he had no rules for this. Nothing to tell him for *certain* what was okay and wasn’t. He never navigated a relationship like this. He had rules for interactions with his martial siblings. Rules for interactions with his sister. Rules for his disciples and strangers.

Just… not *this.*

What if he did the wrong thing?

What if he crossed some boundary, unknown to him but known to everyone else?

What if-

Shen Yuan loosened his hold on Luo Binghe. He looked from side to side, and twisted until he spotted what he was searching for: Liu Qingge.

Had… he expected him to join…?

“Qingge,” Shen Yuan murmured. He glanced up at him with dark eyes that shined from an echo of tears. His hand reached out.

Liu Qingge moved. He was on the floor, gathering both Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan in his arms. His heart pounded.

“Th-thank you,” Shen Yuan flustered. He hid his face. “…for… the call. With my sister.”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge answered.

The call was nothing. There wasn't a lot that he *wouldn't* do for them. He would trek across the world. He would fight an endless battle that lasted years. He would answer a phone call. He loved them. Both of them. He loved them differently but not at all any less than the other.

One day he hoped he was strong enough to tell them.

Shen Yuan stalled by the front door. "See that? That's me. And that shows Binghe." He was pointing at two sigils on the map. "I'll be right here." It might have been the fifth or so time he had told them. He leaned heavily against his cane, shoulder resting on the wall.

So many words sat on Liu Qingge's tongue. He wanted to ask Shen Yuan to stay. He knew he should tell him to leave. His sister waited for him. And… they had accidentally made Shen Yuan late. The issue was that Shen Yuan necessarily didn't *want* to leave, and Luo Binghe didn't *want* him to go, so they were feeding into another and drawing out a goodbye that honestly was going on for far too long.

"Do you know how to get to the contacts?" Shen Yuan asked.

"Can Shizun show this disciple again?"

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge set his hands on Shen Yuan's shoulders and guided him out the door. "Go. We will be here when you come home."

Then he was gone.

Luo Binghe stole Liu Qingge's phone and obsessively watched the little sigil move. The apartment was quiet. Curled around the phone, Luo Binghe collapsed onto the couch and worried his lower lip with his teeth. He stayed that way, at least until Liu Qingge told him to get up and ran him through exercises.

They spent their time that way: working out, sparring, taking a quick shower, and then collapsing onto the couch so Luo Binghe could talk at him more. The afternoon's topic was food.

Liu Qingge was surprised how much he adored listening to Luo Binghe. When the brat wasn't sobbing or being a little shit, he was actually quite intelligent. (Maybe that's how he became a fucking *emperor.)* (No, Liu Qingge wasn't over that.) He was explaining how he might substitute ingredients so that Shen Yuan could try similar desserts to what they had the previous night.

It was as Liu Qingge was beginning to get hungry again that a phone started making noise

Luo Binghe lurched for it and plucked it off the low table in front of the couch. He answered immediately. "A-Yuan?" After a moment, he pulled the phone away from his ear and frowned

down at the symbols on the face of it. After pressing one, Shen Yuan's voice was projected loud enough for both of them to hear.

"…did you get it?"

"Yes, A-Yuan!"

"I, uh…" Shen Yuan paused. "My sister… wants to come hang out…?"

Liu Qingge considered the phone. "When?"

"…right now?"

Shock widened Luo Binghe's eyes and he shoved the phone into Liu Qingge's hands. He immediately launched off of the couch and started cleaning.

Mouth curving wryly, Liu Qingge said, "Alright."

"Are you sure? If it's too much…"

He watched Luo Binghe rush into the kitchen and scramble to put semi-dried dishes away. "It's fine. You should stall."

"Ah. Well, I can grab something for lunch on the way-"

"No!" Luo Binghe roared, offended.

Liu Qingge snorted. "Binghe said-"

"I heard," Shen Yuan said with a sigh. It was softened by obvious fondness.

"Can we try 'boba'?" Liu Qingge asked.

"Ahh, that's a good idea," Shen Yuan said. "You actually tried something similar at the mall. We'll get another round of drinks and meander. Maybe twenty minutes?"

"Mn," Liu Qingge answered. "See you soon."

"Mn! Love you, bye."

The line ended. Liu Qingge stared down at the phone, face heating.

A strangled sound escaped Luo Binghe. He looked just about ready to punch something or self-combust. He threw big watery eyes at Liu Qingge that essentially said the same thing that he was thinking:

I love that idiot.

Really, Luo Binghe's thoughts were probably more along the lines of: *Shizun, Shizun, blah, I love him so much, blah blah, my shizun.* Or something.

“...it was probably an accident,” Liu Qingge choked out. Neither of them should press Shen Yuan about it.

“Mn,” Luo Binghe agreed.

They stared at another, both coming to the same conclusion: accident or not, both of them knew without a doubt that Shen Yuan had *meant* it.

I’ll tell them, Liu Qingge promised. *I’ll tell them that I love them.*

…he just had to figure out what was stopping him.

(Rules. He needed the rules.)

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

4.8k which is roughly a 21 ish minute reading time.

Ahhhh!! Everyone's comments always makes me so happy. You guys are so incredibly funny and sweet! Honestly, thank you so much for the support <3 I love going back through and reading everyone's thoughts! Thank you!!

A little bit of a warning for this chapter: it gets a little sad.

CW: DNR, talking about terminal illness, and bad parenting choices.

The walk to the nearby boba shop was too quick. Shen Yuan's heart squeezed uncomfortably as he recognized his sister's silhouette, sitting at their usual booth in the corner. As he crossed the street, he exhaled through his nose and straightened his spine. His cane clicked beside him. He entered the shop, and the woman behind the counter greeted him. She had two drinks waiting for him, and he nodded to her in appreciation even as his stomach dropped in anticipation.

He had been hoping to have just a few more minutes while they made drinks to psych himself up.

Ah!!

This is what you get for living near a boba shop that was within walking distance!!

(A *Shen Yuan* walking distance!)

After paying for the drinks, he went over to the corner booth and took a seat. He had faced an entire council of powerful cultivators. He had slayed beasts that stood taller than a horse. He had faced *demons* in a contest that threatened the lives of multiple disciples!

He could face *one* girl.

Huiying glanced up and greeted him, "San-ge."

He wanted to run. He wanted the System to yank him back into PIDW and never have this conversation.

But he also wanted his sister not to worry about him.

He slid her drink and straw across the table, and took a steadying breath. Growing up as he had, there was never a shortage of private tutors. Despite his illness, he pushed himself and managed to become somewhat well learned in this life. He knew about chemistry, biology, classic literature, physics, and calculus – so on, and so forth. The single subject he lacked, the one that continued to be his downfall, was…

Feelings.

He had attempted to be the type of big brother that was okay with sharing all that stuff. The problem was: he *wasn't.* His life had always been a tight smile and saying, "It's okay," when it wasn't. Got sick again? It's fine! He wasn't worried, so his parents shouldn't either. Passed out while doing a physical test at school? It's okay! This is normal! Can everyone stop talking about it now?

People already had to deal with his *physical* ailments, why bother them with the *emotional* ones?

Besides, it was never *that bad.*

It was fine.

Everything was *fine.*

(If he just kept ignoring it, it would all be *fine.)*

Tactlessly, Shen Yuan got straight to the point. "I never meant to sign the DNR without discussing it." He couldn't look her in the eye, shame heating up his throat. It wasn't that he was ashamed of looking into a DNR – he could decide what was best for his health. He was ashamed of how he had acted during that time. "I…" He raised a hand to his temple, trying to remember something that felt like a lifetime ago. "I had just asked about it, after a particularly rough episode. Dad said Da-ge stepped out of an important conference because of it-"

"Dad's thickskulled shithead," Huiying snapped.

Shen Yuan stopped.

Tears glittered in Huiying's eyes and her mouth wobbled. She blinked fiercely and glanced away from him.

He took a second to look her over. She wore er-ge's jacket, and an old pair of leggings. It wasn't her usual stringent fashion. Plus, it was a school day… wasn't it? She shouldn't be here – she should be at *school.* He pulled out his phone and confirmed it. "...you're staying with er-ge."

"I had a fight with Mom and Dad," Huiying said, her eyes lowering. "Er-ge backed me up, and we left."

Shen Yuan's heart sank. He didn't want to ask, but he had to. "About… me?"

“I told them about the DNR and Dad said-” Huiying gripped her phone, the corners of her eyes reddening. “He said, *‘About time.’”* She shook with frustration and rage, fighting to keep her composure.

Shen Yuan… wasn’t surprised. It was what he had expected of them. His eyes fell to the table, feeling a strange lump in his throat. He didn’t touch his drink. Both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge were less than a ten minute’s walk away, but-

It felt so far away.

(He needed them here.)

(He would never actually ever admit that.)

“Mom and Dad,” Shen Yuan started.

“Stop making excuses for them!” Huiying hissed. “They don’t deserve it-”

“They were here for me my *entire* life, meimei-”

“And you were here for *mine!”* Her voice rose just loud enough to cut through the ambient chatter of the boba shop. Huiying stared at him with her dark eyes watering with restrained tears.

Shen Yuan stared at her. The booth they sat in was a little out of the way, tucked into a small corner with a solid wall giving them the semblance of privacy. They had sat here and ranted about their shitty webnovels or danmei or whatever. But never had they raised their voices like *that.* Both of them had been raised too strictly to cause any disturbance or call attention to themselves. He moved. In an instant, he was on the other side of the table, sharing her booth. He had an arm around her shoulders, tucking her in close like she was three and not almost seventeen. His heart felt heavy. He held her close and ignored the quiet hitch of her breath as she sank into his arms and tucked her face against his chest.

She was right, afterall.

In the end, it had been him. He was the one she went to when she was upset, even if neither could really talk about it. He was the one who made her smile again. He was the one who knew what presents she actually wanted. He was the one she eagerly ran to when she aced a test.

In a crowd, Huiying would always look to him to make sure he was there beside her.

Not their mom. Not their dad.

Him.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. His eyes squeezed shut. He remembered the first time Huiying had a temper tantrum as a toddler. She was screaming and stomping her feet, and their mother had bent down to scold her. He had inched into the room, small and curious as to why the little snot of a sister was crying. As soon as Huiying saw him, she stumbled right past their

mother and threw herself at him. He had dropped to the ground and caught her. She clung onto his shirt and just *wailed.* He held her, young and flustered at the time, but he never told her to stop. He held her close until her sobs dissolved.

His mother had crossed her arms and told him that he was going to spoil her.

Shen Yuan had never seen a problem with that.

It felt a little like that day; but worse, because *he* was the one that made his sister want to cry. Shen Yuan wished he could fix it. He *hated* seeing anyone cry – he never knew what he could do to stop it. So, he did what he always did. He just held her. Huiying curled tighter, clinging onto his clothes. He knew better than to say anything about the way her shoulders shook. He knew to ignore the way the front of his jacket grew wet. He held her, like he once had a lifetime ago. Tears swelled in his throat. He was going to miss her.

Leaving the first time had never been a choice – just an event. There was no use thinking about something he couldn't change, so he didn't. Why would he worry about his family, when they were a lifetime away?

This time…

This time he could say goodbye.

Inhaling through his nose, Shen Yuan steeled himself. He thought of Liu Qingge's sturdy assurance and Luo Binghe's understanding encouragement. He forced himself to communicate. "Mom and Dad are grieving in their own way, Huiying," he told her, quietly. "Forgive them."

"Love isn't conditional," Huiying choked.

"It's not," Shen Yuan said. "...sometimes you just love someone so much it hurts to watch them leave, so it's easier to push them away." He ran a hand over her hair. She was still young. She still lived in a world of *right* and *wrong,* not one with areas of gray. In the end, his parents were people – they made bad decisions. That didn't take away the fact that they had *tried.*

(Not… that he was an expert when it came to these things. But he was trying.)

"You were right," he continued, voice soft. "I was grieving my own death when I still had a life to live. It wasn't fair to you, or da-ge and er-ge. I should have trusted you more."

With a strangled sound, Huiying clung onto him more tightly.

"I'll trust you more," he promised, eyes pricking with tears. It was embarrassing and difficult to say the words. He said them anyway. "I'll burden you."

Huiying broke. Her shoulders shook and she sobbed into his chest. She gasped as she tried to speak, and in the end clung onto him. He knew what she wanted to say:

Don't leave me.

She didn't, because she knew that he didn't have a choice.

I'll always be there for you, Shen Yuan wanted to promise. He didn't. Because he knew it would be a lie.

Goodbye, he thought, holding her close. *Thank you.*

He hoped the two of them would run into each other again in the next life. He hoped she would grow up happy, surrounded by a big family that loved and adored her. He hoped that she knew no matter where he went, she would always be his meimei and that he would never forget her.

He managed to tell her most of that.

He managed to only cry a little bit.

There was more to be said. The two spoke quietly, ignoring each other's wet eyes, and had a *real* talk. It… might have been the most vulnerable conversation that Shen Yuan had ever had with anyone. (Ignoring the one that he had in the hospital with the war god and the protagonist.) They talked about *feelings* – in a stilted manner. It was difficult. It was awkward. But it… was *needed.*

After a while, Huiying lifted out of his arms. She cleaned up her face with her sleeves. "I'm sorry… for what I said the other day."

"I understand," Shen Yuan said. He really did. After all this time, he was beginning to understand why people reacted the way they did when they were hurt. Maybe because he had hurt so many people around him. He thought that his sister had reached her limit for emotional vulnerability and physical condolences.

He was wrong.

With a smile, Huiying fell back against him. She rested her head on his shoulder. "I knew I fucked up when I told er-ge what I said and he gave me a thumbs-up."

Shen Yuan laughed.

The conversation became easier after that. Shen Yuan asked her about school. He offered to help her study for her exams. Then they reminisced. They had a playful argument on whose birthday it was when Huiying ended up snorting strawberry milk. He ended up taking out his phone to *prove* he was right when he opened up his photo gallery and saw *dozens* of pictures of himself. His cheeks scorched.

Aiyah, shidi!!! So many pictures!? Why!?!

He tried to quickly swipe past them when his sister stopped him. She clicked on one where he was gently scolding Luo Binghe in his lap.

A smile tucked into the corner of her lips and she said, "They make you really happy."

She… was right. They did.

"Stop," Shen Yuan muttered, flustered. He quickly flipped back through the pictures. After he proved that he *was* correct, it was her thirteenth birthday, they dived back into shared memories. They laughed at a video where his er-ge had been determined to jump over a pole and instead flopped face first into the ground.

They found one where da-ge had Shen Yuan trapped in a one-armed hug. They were in his apartment – he could tell as much. But he couldn't remember *why.* The time stamp was about two weeks after his birthday, so it wasn't that. Shen Yuan pursed his lips, "I… what were we doing here?"

Huiying cast him a glance. "We surprised you for your birthday. Da-ge flew in and you were *so* happy to see him, you cried!"

Now that Shen Yuan peered in closer, his eyes did look a little puffy. He frowned, embarrassed as the memory flooded back to him. That had been a rough year. It was around when he had moved out on his own for the first time, determined to stop dragging his siblings down. Then his birthday had come and gone – it was the first one he had ever spent alone. A few weeks later, his siblings practically broke down his front door with decorations, treats, and gifts. He glanced at the time stamp of the photo, and he realized that it would have taken place only *two* years ago for Huiying.

His heart sank, and he suddenly understood why his sister had given him that look before. He began to wonder if their little trip down memory lane was less of a friendly jaunt and more of a test.

"So," Huiying said, resting her chin on her hand. "Remember what I said last weekend? When we were watching the best show on earth?"

Shen Yuan absolutely did *not* remember. While he had a decent memory, there was no way he was going to remember some off-shoot conversation. Expression flat, he threw her an irritated glance. "You talk so much and want me to remember everything that leaves your big mouth?"

With a laugh, Huiying elbowed him on the side. She grabbed her drink and plunged her straw through the top, watching him curiously. After a few sips, she said, "What show were we watching, san-ge?"

That should be something Shen Yuan remembered. His stomach fell. He grabbed his own drink, piercing through the plastic top with a straw, and gave himself a few moments while he tried to scrounge up that memory. Even as he tried, he knew he had already failed the test. The fact his sister was asking in the first place means that he had messed up one too many times, and this was her roundabout way of bringing the topic up. He decided to humor the question. "The one with the wandering junk god."

"Mn," Huiying took another drink. "We didn't watch anything, san-ge."

Well. Shen Yuan breathed in through his nose. His father had mentioned something about his sister's exams. "I helped you with your studies," he guessed. His skin itched like it didn't quite fit anymore.

"Mmhm." Huiying nodded and let her eyes fall away. "You're a little too young to be experiencing memory loss, ge."

Shen Yuan's tongue turned to lead in his mouth. Maybe memory loss was preferable to her brother becoming insane. He stared down into his drink. Huiying let him take his time to figure out where he wanted this conversation to turn. He mixed his drink with the straw. Eyes falling shut, he murmured, "Just promise me, no insane asylum…?"

"Are you hurting yourself?" Huiying asked.

He gave her another sardonic glance with a perked eyebrow.

"Just making sure," she said with a shrug. "Deal."

Shen Yuan opened his mouth. It was hard tying together the words. Every single time he thought of how to start, he didn't know where to go from there. How could he ever explain anything as nonsensical as what was *currently* happening to him?

Two men from that novel I have read have followed me from the book and are now courting me? Apparently!? I lived in that novel for a few years as the scum villain, but somehow have escaped my fate… other than, of course, turning the entire sect world against me.

"...imagine," Huiying started, "transmigration was real."

Shen Yuan's eyes snapped open and he stared at her.

"...imagine," she continued, hesitantly, "my brother's soul left for a short trip, and he managed to snag two hotties on the way home."

Skin heating, Shen Yuan glared at her. His throat tightened and he couldn't decide if she was saying it all as a joke.

The corner of her mouth pulled like she was teasing him, but there was something in her eye that had a little hint of uncertainty. There might have been plenty of clues for her to follow.

(She would fit well on Qing Jing Peak, wouldn't she?)

"Imagine," Shen Yuan said, his voice shaking slightly, "transmigration was real, and you thought you died." His throat tightened. He couldn't believe he was saying any of this. Lips going numb, he dropped his gaze into his trembling hands. "You wake up in a completely new world, and realize it's the worst fucking novel ever written."

"Except you're obsessed with it so you know everything," Huiying continued. She teased, but her voice wobbled with incredulity.

"Not-" Shen Yuan sighed with a huff. "Not *everything."*

“Well. You know a great big deal because you’re a big nerd.”

“You’re such a *brat,*” Shen Yuan snapped. He glared up at her. “It wasn’t *everything!* God, I wish it was everything-” They froze. Both got caught on the ridiculousness and impossibility of what they were saying.

Huiying watched him as if she was staring at a cartoon character come to life, not her brother. “Really?”

Shen Yuan swallowed. He nodded.

His sister glanced away from him and stared disbelieving into her boba. She went to take a drink, and decided halfway that she wasn’t in the mood. Leaning back, she stared up at the ceiling. “Luo Binghe.”

“...is that how you figured it out?”

“Sort of..?” Huiying braved a glance at him. “You changed.” Her expression became thoughtful. “...you’re… more mature, in some ways. You hold yourself differently. You even *talk* differently.”

Shen Yuan frowned. He thought he had been doing a pretty good job at slipping back into modern speech patterns! It’s not like he’s *entirely* out of practice, seeing as he got to speak with Airplane on occasion but…

“Luo Binghe sort of sold it,” Huiying confessed. “First, it was really weird you suddenly made two friends like that. Er-ge and you had a fight one time about you not having any friends, and you said it was because you didn’t want to drag anyone else down. And you lied – you said you went to pick them up from the airport, but, like… bro. Come on. When did you have time to do that?” She glanced at him and raised an eyebrow. “You are also… *really* close to the two of them. Like.” Her eyebrows raised suggestively. “*Close.”*

“*Huiying,”* Shen Yuan hissed, and he felt his face betray him with a blush.

“You’re not like that,” Huiying continued. “You take like twenty business years to let your walls down for *anyone.*” She motioned vaguely, dispelling any of his protests, and said, “And when I first saw Luo Binghe on the video call… something sort of niggled my brain. He looked so familiar. Then we met again and he introduced himself. There’s the off chance that you managed to hire two people to go around and play cultivation with you, or whatever. But…” She searched his eyes. “You really care for them. And you wouldn’t be able to act like that with actors.”

Shen Yuan’s lip twitched at the idea of Liu Qingge trying to *act.*

The reality of the situation crashed down on Huiying. With a small sound, she reached up and grasped fistfuls of her hair. “There’s no way.” Her mouth twisted with disbelief. It seemed to *really* hit her just then that there was a *high* possibility that her brother was actually clinically insane… or a transmigrator. Neither were great options.

“It was…” Shen Yuan said, counting on his fingers. “Almost six years.”

Huiying blanched.

Shen Yuan leaned back. There was still a knot in his chest and it felt like he might swallow his tongue at any moment. “I got a System and everything.”

His sister squeezed her head between her hands. “Oh my, God.”

“It’s an asshole, by the way,” Shen Yuan continued. “Prickly and *not* helpful.”

“There’s no way,” Huiying muttered, staring ahead of her.

“You’re the one who suggested it in the first place!”

“It was just supposed to be a joke, and you were going to laugh it off and then you were going to tell me that those men in your apartment were actually your neighbors!” Huiying protested.

“You don’t really mean that,” Shen Yuan said.

“No, I don’t, because you would have mentioned your *really hot* neighbor-”

“Please stop drooling over my disciple-”

“Oh my, *God!”*

Shen Yuan raised an eyebrow.

“You called him your *disciple,”* Huiying pointed out. “Holy shit. Does he call you *laoshi?”*

“No.” Shen Yuan was not going to correct her. He absolutely was *not.*

“Do it,” Huiying motioned at him. “Talk all weird.”

“I will not,” Shen Yuan shook his head. “That’s just stupid.”

“Come on,” his sister elbowed him. “Prove it. Six years of xianxia speech. Now. Go!”

“I will *not!”* He snapped. His face was red.

“*San-ge,”* Huiying whined. She turned big eyes at him. “San-ge, *please*….*”*

Rolling his eyes, he shoved her face away from his. “No. Not here. Stop.”

“Do Luo-ge and Liu-ge talk all weird?” Huiying asked.

“They speak *formally,”* Shen Yuan corrected sharply. He paused and said, “Well. Binghe does.” He wasn’t quite sure if he had ever heard his shidi care *too* much about formality and manners when it came to speech. “He’s stopped to… fit in.”

“So, this is… like, really real?” Huiying asked.

“...yeah.” Shen Yuan studied her expression. “I… actually.” He crossed his arms. “...I’ll be going back.”

The humor fell away from her. Huiying swallowed a few times, as if shoving down tears, and stared at him.

“The reason I am here now,” Shen Yuan continued, carefully, “is because something happened to the System.” Well, Luo Binghe happened. “It’s why Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe are here as well. But… we will need to go back. And fix it.” If his sister asked how they were going to fix it, he might choose to jump out in front of a car.

Huiying’s lower lip trembled. “And… the System won’t let you visit?”

“I… don’t know,” Shen Yuan confessed. It had never been an option, only a threat. And he had always assumed he had died. “Binghe has Xin Mo but…”

The tail end of that sentence hung between them. Shen Yuan had a hard time looking at her. There was a squirrely feeling of discomfort that kept orbiting his stomach. He wasn’t quite sure if his sister believed him. In the end, what other choice would she have? At some point (really, any point now) the System would pluck them back from this world and deposit them back into PIDW.

He won’t be back.

Huiying’s next question surprised him. “In the other world are you… better?”

His shock melted away into a small smile. Shen Yuan reached out and took her hand. “In the other world, I’m immortal.” He thought of Luo Binghe’s words.

She deserves to know you’re living on in another life, and that you’re cherished and you are loved and you’re powerful and incredible-

Taking in a slow breath, Shen Yuan turned to her. “Well. Want to know how I sort of… ruined Proud Immortal Demon Way?”

Huiying nodded with a wobbly smile.

“Alright. Well,” Shen Yuan held open his arms. She fell against him, tucking her head underneath his chin, as he started his story. “I woke up in a strange place. I’ve read *far* too many of Zhongdian’s transmigration novels to be stupid about it. It was *obviously* different, because there was a strangely good-looking man sitting there in really elaborate robes! Calling me *shidi!”* He told her the vague version of the story – the version where everything was happy and lighthearted. He didn’t tell her about getting poisoned by Without-a-Cure. He didn’t tell her the horrors of the Immortal Conference. He *did* tell her how the System forced him to throw Luo Binghe into the Abyss.

His sister had known PIDW well enough to know the story beats, and she understood the horror of Shen Yuan waking up as *Shen Qingqiu*. She also knew enough not to press when he

skirted around certain subjects.

It was nice talking about (almost) all of it with someone who knew the story and knew *him.*

By the time he wrapped up, he said, “And… the last thing I had done was make a few cultivators mad. But knowing Binghe, he’ll figure it out.” He shrugged. “Plus! He has the War God at his side, who is basically a protagonist all on his own. Things will get resolved in no time.”

Huiying raised an eyebrow at him, watching him with the same look she gave da-ge whenever he talked about his fiance.

Heat prickled Shen Yuan’s cheeks and he glowered. “What?”

“Nothing,” Huiying said, cheekily. She finished off her drink and chased boba around with her straw. “When…” Her eyebrows pinched. “When are you going back?”

Shen Yuan did not have the answer to that. Every time they had ended up in this world, it took just a little longer before they went back. First a few hours. Then almost an entire day. If the trend stayed the same, they would return either sometime tonight or the next day. “Probably soon. I… don’t know exactly. It’s not exactly something we have had a choice in.”

With a quiet nod, Huiying squeezed her empty cup in her hands. “...okay.”

He set a hand on her shoulder. “Want to… hang out?”

Huiying startled. A smile pulled the corner of her lips and she said gleefully, “And interrogate a half-demon and a war god?”

“*The* war god,” Shen Yuan corrected. He was smiling, though there was a slight twinge of worry in his chest. He *hadn’t* told his sister that… *apparently* both of those men were in love with him, and all three might be courting now. He hadn’t even been able to process that *himself!!*

“I’d love to,” Huiying said.

“I’ll call to make sure it’s good with them,” Shen Yuan said, and he pulled out his phone.

“You bought them *phones?”* Huiying narrowed her eyes. “To use for, what, one day?”

“You were the one who pointed out they didn’t have any!” He snapped at her. “Shut up. It’s ringing-”

Luo Binghe answered. The small knot in Shen Yuan’s chest loosened, hearing his voice. He didn’t realize how tense he had been before, not until his shoulders relaxed.

“Put them on video,” Huiying demanded, poking his side.

“*Stop,”* Shen Yuan hissed, and he attempted to fend off his sister's incessant annoying jabs while trying to walk Luo Binghe through putting him on speaker. He snatched out a hand and

tugged the hood of Huiying's jacket over her face. He held it there as she squirmed and laughed, trying to get away.

Liu Qingge's voice rumbled through the receiver, and Shen Yuan lost his hold on his sister's jacket. He was looking forward to going home. Even if he hadn't even been out that long.

(He was never going to admit that.)

As soon as Huiying was freed, she tried to steal his phone. "Put them on video! On video! Ge!"

"We're going to see them in a few minutes, you *brat!"* Shen Yuan snapped at her. He was trying to coordinate time and food, and his *sister* was being an absolute menace.

What else did he expect, really?

By the time they finally figured out what to do, Shen Yuan had his sister in a chokehold and was twisting awkwardly to stop her grubby hands from snatching the phone. She kept cooing and making suggestive sounds.

Ugh. Siblings.

"Mn. See you soon."

"Mn!" Shen Yuan responded, and he considered kneeing his sister in the stomach. "Love you, bye!" He hung up.

Both siblings stilled.

A particularly evil spark lit Huiying's eyes.

Horror and mortification oozed over Shen Yuan. His mouth fell open. A blush began to cook his skin.

"*Looooove* you," Huiying cooed.

"Shut up!" Shen Yuan snapped. He shoved her to the other side of the booth. "Oh, my *God!* That was your fault-"

"-you looooooovvve them!"

"-if you weren't being such a *turd-"*

Huiying wrapped her arms around herself and made kissing sounds.

It was unfair!!! Most of the people Shen Yuan called were his *family!* That was his sign-off! A short "Love you, bye!" It wasn't *his* fault that his sister was distracting him and-

"Oh, *Binghe,* this shizun loves you *so much!"* Huiying said, suggestively.

“You’re *dead!”* Shen Yuan shouted, and the two became a mess of petty slaps and jabs. Never mind. It was an awful and *terrible* idea to invite his sister over.

System??? HELLO????

It’s time! Bring me back!!!!!

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

4.4k words 19 ish minutes reading time.

...chapter count is probably closer to 44. Not 40...

Again, thank you SO much for the support. I really love seeing everyone's reactions. Your comments bring me so much joy and have made me laugh so much.

Thank you!!

No content warnings, other than of course that saddened shadow of an inevitable goodbye.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luo Binghe rearranged his curls and pulled them into a half bun. His lips thinned as he glowered at the mirror. The bun was *partially* too lumpy and unbalanced. Plus, the chunk of hair he left out was a bit too much, and-

Without a single word, Liu Qingge stepped into the bathroom behind him. He set his hands on his shoulders, and directed him to sit down on the toilet, facing away from him. He untied the bun. With careful diligence, he worked on Luo Binghe's hair. "The house is perfect." He arranged each curl, threading braids on either side of his head, and pulled it all into a half-bun. "The snacks are perfect." He turned Luo Binghe around with a nudge to his knees. Leaning down, he glared. "You're perfect."

Luo Binghe felt unmoored. He stared up at his shishu, throat tight.

The glare lessened. Liu Qingge reached up and held Luo Binghe's face in his hands and he said, "Binghe will be fine."

Closing his eyes, Luo Binghe sank into the comfort of his shishu's sturdy, calloused hands. He nodded. "Thanking Shishu."

"Mn." Liu Qingge tugged him onto his feet.

As he stood, he followed his shishu out of the bathroom. There was no need for him to check the war god's work – he trusted that no matter the state of his hair, that his shishu wouldn't let him walk around looking unkempt. He stepped out and peered around the apartment. Everything was in place. Not a speck of dirt dared to impede on *his* turf.

"You're good with people," Liu Qingge said. "Don't be nervous."

Luo Binghe glanced over at his shishu. The man had languidly crossed towards the kitchen island, where he leaned against the bar. He wore loose fitting pants with a long sleeved shirt that was pushed up to his elbows, exposing his wrists and forearms. It was very distracting. "What does Shishu do when he's nervous?" Luo Binghe asked.

"Fight," Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow. Then he paused.

Smiling, Luo Binghe continued, "Do you plan on fighting Shen-mei?"

The war god threw him an unamused glance. "No. I am not nervous."

"You're not afraid she won't like you?" Luo Binghe asked.

"People don't like me all the time," Liu Qingge pointed out.

"But Shen-mei matters a *lot* to Shizun."

"*You* matter to him, too," Liu Qingge said. He crossed his arms. "You didn't like me."

Shaking his head, Luo Binghe stared at the war god in wonder.

"What?" A soft, rosy blush lifted to his shishu's cheeks.

"One day, this disciple aspires to be as wise as his shishu," Luo Binghe said, bowing to him.

Liu Qingge grunted and squinted, as if he couldn't figure out if Luo Binghe was pulling his leg. In this instance, he wasn't. He was surprised at his shishu's stalwart determination *not* to care what others thought of him. Whereas Luo Binghe had spent the last six months very carefully crafting how others perceived him.

There was a knock at the door. Luo Binghe fluttered around, taking in a deep breath, before he pulled on one of his more charismatic masks and swept towards the door. He pulled it open.

Shizun stood on the other side, one hand holding up a peculiar plastic bag with what appeared to be four drinks inside. The other held his cane. Luo Binghe had planned a clean welcome, to turn towards his shizun's sister and throw his most charming smile at her.

That plan was ruined the moment he saw his shizun. The man's shoulders relaxed and his eyes warmed with relief.

It was too hard fighting the urge to pluck his shizun into his arms and hold him close.

“B-Binghe!”

“Sorry, Yuan-gege,” Luo Binghe murmured, pressing his face into his shizun’s hair. It had *not* been that long since his shizun had left. Though every single minute without him was excruciating. There was a quiet worry in the back of his mind that his shizun’s life would snuff out when his back was turned, and he would have no way of knowing and no way of preventing it.

It was terrifying.

A hand awkwardly patted his back. “Binghe. What is this? Let us in.”

“Yes, Yuan-gege!” Luo Binghe stepped back. He took the drink carrier from his shizun and smiled brightly over at Shen Huiying.

She was in the process of sliding a discrete smirk towards her brother, who flushed considerably. She caught Luo Binghe watching her, and the look on her face changed immediately. With a polite smile, she said, “Hello!”

“Hi!” Luo Binghe grinned. The last time he saw Shen Yuan’s sister, she had pinstraight hair that was meticulously styled. Her clothes were sharp and crisp, without a single thread out of place. Today, her hair was thrown into a haphazard bun and she wore a zip-up jacket that was far too large for her. She was much less put together today. He noted some other small details. There were telltale signs of old tears around her eyes – just like her brother. The two had been crying. He hoped that whatever conversation they were able to have, it was a good one.

He walked over to the counter and set the drinks on the bar, next to his shishu.

The siblings padded into the apartment. Shen Huiying hung back to close the door, while Shizun quietly stepped over to Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge. There, he was caught in a brief hug with the war god. Both separated with a blush.

Shen Huiying drew into the main sitting area, pretending not to see the casual affection, as she glanced around. Her hands were stuffed into the pockets of her jacket. “It smells really good.”

“That’s Binghe’s cooking,” Shen Yuan answered. He handed each of them a drink and showed them how to pierce the top with the straw. To them, he said, “Let me know if you don’t like it. You can try mine.” He set his on the counter and glanced over his shoulder to tell his sister, “He’s going to cook lunch.”

“It’s like… dinner by this point, san-ge,” Shen Huiying teased, flashing him a smile. She raised her eyebrows. “So, I get to try Luo Binghe’s famous cooking?”

“Famous?” Luo Binghe echoed.

“I told her everything,” Shen Yuan explained.

“I… actually never read PIDW,” Shen Huiying said. “What I know is just what Yuan-ge told me.”

Luo Binghe tried to recall what he had read from the webnovel. They hadn’t gotten past the Abyss arc, and frankly he stopped caring about reading it. “My cooking is famous?”

“Ah…” Shen Yuan rubbed the back of his neck, glancing away.

“Mmhmm!” Shen Huiying said, gleefully. “It was described as *heavenly.* The Book Luo only ever cooked for his wives!”

“Huiying,” Shizun hissed, warningly. His skin started to redden.

The corner of Liu Qingge’s mouth twitched. He raised an eyebrow at Luo Binghe, as if to say, *Sounds like you.* He turned his attention towards his drink and he tried it. His face pinched curiously. He shook the cup and peered through the clear plastic.

“She knows *everything,* Shizun?” Luo Binghe clarified, carefully.

“Oh, my God,” Shen Huiying gasped. “He did it.”

“*Huiying,”* Shen Yuan said through his teeth. A brilliant blush settled over his cheeks.

Luo Binghe wondered if he made a misstep and shouldn’t have referred to his shizun that way – though, he suspected it was too late now. He glanced at his shishu, wondering what *he* thought of-

The war god… was now comparing his drink to Luo Binghe’s. He didn’t appear at all as if the conversation had even registered to him. He pointed to the strange black pearls sitting at the bottom of Luo Binghe’s cup. He met his eyes as a quiet question.

Wordlessly amused, Luo Binghe exchanged their drinks.

Liu Qingge tried the new drink. His face squished in extreme distaste, and he traded their drinks back. Hand covering his mouth, he trekked into the kitchen to get rid of the black pearls.

“Ah… Qingge,” Shen Yuan called after him. “I’m sorry. I meant to explain the tapioca pearls.”

The war god waved him off.

A kernel of adoration burned in Luo Binghe’s chest. His shishu really *didn’t* care, did he? He paid attention to the conversation, sure. But he really did not care about getting on anyone’s good side. The burst of emotion made him want to step into the kitchen and provoke his shishu until he snapped at him. For now, he turned back towards his shizun and his sister.

“So…” Shen Huiying pondered. “It’s… real?”

The question was vague, but there was only one thing she could be asking. “Yes,” Luo Binghe answered with a smile.

“Part demon, and all?” Shen Huiying asked. “Emperor, all that jazz?”

Luo Binghe was surprised when his smile became genuine. “Yes and yes.”

“Not hundreds of wives,” Liu Qingge added from the kitchen.

Of *all* the inane things… Luo Binghe’s skin warmed with embarrassment and he threw his shishu a pouting glare.

Mischief sparkled in Liu Qingge’s eyes. He walked back over, and leaned leisurely against the counter.

“Huh.” Shen Huiying leaned against the back of the couch, crossing one leg over the other. “What’s… it like to be part demon?”

“Ying-mei,” Shen Yuan sighed. He was being partially hypocritical; there was a gleam of interest in his eye.

“It’s okay, Shizun. I *do* have a base for comparison now,” Luo Binghe told her. “Seeing as I am human in this realm.” He looked down at his hands. There was no reason to hold back… right? “My emotions are more subdued. Demons feel more strongly. I also-”

“*Subdued?”* Liu Qingge interrupted.

Luo Binghe paused and glanced over at him.

“This is you *subdued?”*

Turning his head, Shen Yuan smirked behind his hand.

“*Shishu,”* Luo Binghe whined.

“Binghe has always felt strongly,” Shen Yuan consoled. Any comfort his words *might* have afforded was ruined by the laughter in his voice.

“*Shizun,”* he murmured, plaintively.

Shen Huiying was grinning. “It’s hard being the youngest,” she said with an understanding nod.

“Continue,” Shen Yuan said, waving his hand.

“All my senses are worse,” Luo Binghe continued, with a faint pout. “I feel weaker too. Though, I am not sure if that’s because of the lack of cultivation.”

“Mn. More tired,” Liu Qingge added. “Not as strong.” He sighed and added, “Hungrier.”

Luo Binghe grinned. He barely resisted the urge to grab at his shishu. “I’ll set out the snacks and get started on lunch!”

“Eyes are fine,” Liu Qingge added. “Binghe squints a lot.”

“He does, doesn’t he?” Shen Yuan added, thoughtfully.

“Luo-ge,” Shen Huiying said, stepping towards the kitchen. “Can I watch?”

“Yes,” Luo Binghe said, surprised.

Shen Yuan added, “Oh, *yeah!* You were in your weird cooking kick, weren’t you?”

“What do you *mean* weird?” Shen Huiying shot back.

“You just get a new hobby like once a year,” Shen Yuan told her, dryly.

“It’s not *once* a year!”

“When you were thirteen you wanted to be a marine biologist so you got *really* into swimming and scuba diving,” Shen Yuan pointed out, numbering on his fingers. “When you were fourteen it was sewing. Mom even got you a studio for that-”

“That doesn’t make it *weird,”* Shen Huiying retorted.

“*You* cooking is weird,” Shen Yuan sniped back. “I’m surprised Mom didn’t buy you your own kitchen just so you wouldn’t burn down the house.”

“You are *so* rude!” Shen Huiying snapped. “I know how to cook!”

“Does Shen-mei want to help me?” Luo Binghe asked.

Both Shen Yuan and Liu Qingge turned towards him in surprise.

Shen Huiying straightened, trying to appear nonchalant with a half shrug. She sniffed and said, “If you would like.” Her eyes held restrained delight.

She was so much like her brother.

Luo Binghe couldn’t fight back his smile. “I’ll walk you through everything, then.” After setting the snacks down on the table, he and Shen Huiying went to work.

His shizun had disappeared into his room with all of the paintings. He mentioned something about “finally having enough players” for some type of game. Liu Qingge followed him with

only half a breath of hesitation. From the room, Luo Binghe could hear a quiet lecture as Shen Yuan went over some of the many different fauna found within PIDW.

“Is… that weird for you?” Shen Huiying asked at Luo Binghe’s elbow. Her eyes narrowed in on the wok as she awkwardly tried to fry up some tofu.

Luo Binghe withheld the need to snatch the wok from her, and turned to focus on the noodles he was pulling. He figured that she wasn’t talking about noodles — the only thing that might be “weird” would either be Shizun and Shishu spending time together, or the ~~shrine~~ collection of portraits that hung in that room. His mouth curled with amusement. “It was confusing at first, only because Shizun…” He stilled as he wasn’t quite sure how to explain the miscommunication between himself and his shizun.

“He told me that the System forced him to toss you into the Abyss,” Shen Huiying answered. “But you didn’t know about the System, so you were understandably upset. You two met up in… some city or whatever, and that’s where you pulled some OP BS and somehow broke the System.”

“OP?” Luo Binghe echoed.

”Overpowered.”

”BS?”

Shen Huiying laughed. “Bullshit.”

“Ah,” Luo BInghe said with a smile. “So much more of Shizun’s grumbles make more sense now.”

Shen Huiying had to let go of the wok to laugh. Gratefully, Luo Binghe took the chance to step in and stop the tofu from burning.

“It’s not weird,” he continued. “It’s flattering. Even if the person in the pictures isn’t *really* me.”

“That’s a fair point,” Shen Huiying said, leaning against the counter. She watched him work, sharp eyes studying every minute movement. “So, you jealous then?”

Luo Binghe smiled. “Of another version of me? No.” He spared a glance towards the room. “I know I’m Shizun’s favorite.”

An eyebrow crawled up Shen Huiying’s forehead. She crossed her arms. “So. You three are a *thing.”* She was confident as she said it, though there was a slight uncertainty in the tilt of her lips.

“You’re asking if we are boyfriends,” Luo Binghe clarified.

”Yup.”

Luo Binghe smiled warmly at her and put her back to work to put off the question. The answer *was* yes, except that if she was asking, that meant his shizun had in fact *not* told his sister "everything." (As he had suspected.)

"Whatever, I know you are," Shen Huiying said, accusingly as she tossed noodles into the pan. "He won't say it because he's emotionally constipated and a closeted scaredy cat."

Well. Those were words. Luo Binghe glanced at her. "It's a relatively new development." After a moment of hesitation, he added, "for Shizun."

Shen Huiying snorted and caught a laugh in her hand. She grinned at him. "I get it. Congrats. You're the first person to successfully break through my brother's stubborn obliviousness." She hesitantly glanced back towards the room. "Well. I suppose it was two of you."

The *first* person? Who else had eyes on his shizun!? Now, that was something that inspired Luo Binghe's jealousy.

Before he could ask, a sound ripped through the air. He turned curiously towards the counter, where Shen Yuan had left his phone.

"Not da-ge or er-ge," Shen Huiying murmured. "Or the 'rents." She raised her voice. "Whose ringtone is that, San-ge?"

"Unknown number," Shen Yuan called from the room. "Go ahead and answer."

With a shrug, Shen Huiying stepped over to the phone and plucked it off the counter. She pressed a button on the phone before answering. "Hello! You've called Shen Yuan. What can I do for you?"

A clear voice filled the kitchen, annoyingly familiar. "…Cucumber-bro?"

Shen Huiying raised her eyebrows. "How'd you get this phone number?"

"…oh. Okay. Okay. That's… new. But! Totally cool. Should-… Is it still 'bro'?"

Grinning, Shen Huiying glanced over at Luo Binghe. Her eyes crinkled in mischievous delight. "Why wouldn't it be 'bro?'"

"…um. Right. Okay! This is cool. Well. On that note, what the *fuck* man!? Why the *hell* did you send me so much money!!"

At the sound of someone shouting on the phone, Shen Yuan instantly tore into the kitchen. He wore a glacial expression, ready to tear into whoever had dared to raise their voice at his sister.

"Bro," Shen Huiying said, staring wide-eyed at Shen Yuan. "Who are you sending money to!?"

The frigid expression on Shen Yuan's face melted just slightly. He glowered at the phone. "Who is that?"

“What is going on!?” The phone pleaded. “What the fuck!”

Shen Yuan raised his eyebrows slightly, and he connected the dots in an instant. “Airplane?”

“Who is this now!? How many people are in Cucumber-bro’s house!?! I just need my main man so I can *yell at him* for sending me too much money, and so we can-“

“Airplane?” Shen Huiying interrupted. “Like. *Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky?”*

“The one and only,” Shen Yuan answered, dryly.

“Oh, ho ho ho, you called the *wrong* number, you misogynistic homophobic little bitch!” Shen Huiying shouted.

“I-“ The phone stammered. “…what?”

“You hack author!! You’re a fucking coward! Ning Yingying deserved so much better than that!” Shen Huiying continued,

“…*another* anti-fan?” The phone muttered. “H-Hey! What do you mean? Ning Yingying was one of the top three wives! Fans *loved* her story!” In a murmur, the phone added, “And her sex scenes.”

Luo Binghe was suddenly very glad he stopped reading PIDW. He had to turn back towards the food to make sure nothing burnt, glowering in frustration. He had allowed the previous phone call from Shang Qinghua to fall between the cracks. Now that the little weasel had called back, there’s no question that all of them would be meeting up soon.

Unfortunate.

”Liu Mingyan was *right there!”* Shen Huiying groaned. “But *nooo!* Yingying had to go after some horse dick!”

Wait. Luo Binghe turned away from the food.

Shen Yuan was covering his face with both of his hands, his entire face bright red.

At the doorway to the painting collection, Shishu stood with a twisted expression.

The phone choked out, “…hold on. Did you just refer to Bingge as *‘horse dick?’”*

“That’s how you describe it!!” Shen Huiying cried.

Luo Binghe turned off the stove. He set aside all the hot pans onto cool burners. Then he dropped his burning face into his hands.

The worst part of it all was that Shen Huiying was *not wrong.* The book continued to describe how fantastic Luo Binghe’s own “parts” were. It suddenly hit him at full force that *Shang Qinghua* had written hundreds, if not *thousands,* of sex scenes, each describing in perfect detail his “heavenly pillar.”

(Shizun had read them all too… hadn't he?)

"Okay. First of all, they were *childhood friends!* It is a STAPLE in the stallion genre to marry and fuck your childhood friend!" Shang Qinghua shouted. "And what sort of connection did Ning Yingying have to Liu Mingyan other than the fact that they grew up on two different peaks!?"

"Liu Mingyan could have had *such* a good wife!" Shen Huiying argued back. "They met at the demonic invasion!! Their romance could have started there! You had such an ample opportunity! Especially after her brother's death — just, *ugh!"*

"Alright." Shen Yuan reached forward and snatched the phone away from his sister. "You didn't even *read* the book."

"I can still be mad about it!" Shen Huiying huffed.

"*You didn't even read it-!?"* Shang Qinghua cried in frustration.

"Do it," Shen Yuan spoke into the phone in a calm and cold voice. "Yell at her."

Shang Qinghua shut up immediately.

Silence settled on the apartment. Shen Yuan threw a sharp glare towards Shen Huiying. "You realize you're talking about *Binghe*, right?"

"Don't give me that," Shen Huiying crossed her arms. "It's not like they're the book versions! They're just characters that have the same name at this point."

Shen Yuan froze.

Suddenly folding into the epitome of grace and decorum, Shen Huiying turned to Luo Binghe. "My apologies, Luo-ge, if my words made you uncomfortable. I was talking about the Book Luo. Not you." She bowed.

The corner of Luo Binghe's lip quirked. How had Shen Yuan's sister differentiated the two "versions" *so quickly,* when his own shizun still struggled with it immensely?

Shen Huiying turned to Liu Qingge and repeated the apology to him. Looking like he just ate a frog, the war god made a vague gesture of forgiveness and dragged himself to the table. He sat down and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"...well, it got a little foggy there, but now I definitely know which one of you is Cucumber-bro."

Rolling his eyes, Shen Yuan walked over to the table and tossed his phone down onto it. He crossed his arms, raised his chin, and glowered menacingly at the phone. "Was that ever in question?"

"Look, man. Whoever answered the phone first used *your* name."

“That’s because it’s *my phone.”*

“Okay. Whatever. But, bro? Seriously? What’s all the money?”

The conversation at the dining room table turned into an argument between Shen Yuan and Shang Qinghua, with the latter sounding shockingly *legitimately* angry. He muttered something about “privileged rich boy” and Shen Yuan *very* quickly changed tactics and mentioned something called a “commission.”

“He has more friends,” Shen Huiying said, full of awe, as she stepped back toward the stove. Her eyebrows furrowed and she gave him a critical glance. “Not another ‘friend,’ right?”

Luo Binghe’s face fell. She was asking if Shang Qinghua was involved in their courtship. He darkly said, “No.”

A laugh bubbled from Shen Huiying. She covered her mouth with a hand, her eyes curving with her amusement.

Smoothing out his expression, Luo Binghe gave her a questioning glance.

“It’s just-“ Shen Huiying bit back her laugh. “Sorry. You’re some emperor or whatever but that was *really* funny. You are all smiles and then just *immediately,”* she waved a hand over her face and dropped her smile into a grumpy frown. It broke seconds later as she giggled. “Sorry.”

“No.” Luo Binghe smiled at her. “No need to apologize. I’m glad-“ he cut off as he tried to figure out the best way to phrase “I’m glad I don’t scare my shizun’s sister.” He was *more* than happy to scare anyone else — just… not her. He hadn’t meant to lose control of himself like that.

Shen Huiying elbowed him playfully. “You’re alright, I guess.”

Warmth swelled in Luo Binghe’s chest. He would take that.

Her eyes narrowed and she pointed at him. “That doesn’t mean I will let you off easy if you hurt my brother, though! I’ll travel through all the dimensions to kick your ass, home boy!” She playfully put up her fists and jabbed at the air in front of him.

Luo Binghe grinned. “I’d sooner rip out my own heart than hurt Shizun,” he promised.

“Somehow, it feels like you mean that literally.”

He did. He *absolutely* did. Instead of saying that, he asked, “Would you like me to deliver the message to Liu-shishu as well?”

“No. I’ll give him the shovel talk later.” Shen Huiying placed her hands on her hips and turned towards the table. There Shen Yuan was having another argument with Shang Qinghua, this time about street names and addresses.

Their friendship was… really demonic in nature, really. They even had physical affection (violence) as a part of the mix.

(Yes, Luo Binghe was jealous.)

"So, wait." Shen Huiying tapped her chin in thought. "How do you know Airplane?"

"In the other world, he is Shang Qinghua."

"Isn't that the…" Shen Huiying's face scrunched. "He's the little spy – the minion to that ice king guy, who *obviously* wanted to f-" Her eyes widened and she stopped herself. She glanced over at him.

"Mn. That's him. And the 'ice king guy' still wants to do that," Luo Binghe answered, amused. "Shang Qinghua is in a similar situation as Shizun."

Shen Huiying shook her head. "This is… *wild.* What? There's two of them? It's not transmittable, is it?" She eyed Luo Binghe. "Because I would *not* do well in a xianxia cultivation world, bro. This girl *likes* showers, boba, and the internet."

Smiling, Luo Binghe shook his head, "We only know of Shizun and Shang Qinghua. I doubt it is… *transmittable."* Well. The System siphoning their qi was transmittable, but here there was no qi to siphon. "You're safe."

"...and my brother," Shen Huiying added. "He's safe?"

Luo Binghe's smile sobered. He glanced over towards the table, where his shizun was rubbing his temples and calling Shang Qinghua an idiot. "Back in our world, he has many who love him. He has a flock of disciples that adore him. An entire sect who would gladly fight for him." Jealousy burned his lungs at the thought of *all* who got to bask in his shizun's light, and a dark part of him wanted to cut them all down and hoard that light all to himself. But he knew that it would only hurt his shizun. "He is happy." He could say that now, without a hint of doubt. He promised, "I'll always protect him. I'll do whatever it takes."

"...you better," Shen Huiying said, with a soft smile. Her eyes shined slightly, and she quietly cleared her throat. "Well. Should we finish making dinner?"

"Mn," Luo Binghe answered. He tore his gaze away from his shizun. He had worried the entire night about making Shen Huiying like *him.* He never expected that by the end of the night, he would come to care for her, too. He thought he might be jealous and despise someone who stole his shizun's attention.

But meeting Shen Huiying, and seeing how much the two siblings cared for another…

It only made his heart swell.

I promise I will protect him and make him happy when you can't, Luo Binghe thought to her. *I promise to spoil him and show him the world. I promise that wherever you are, Shen Huiying, your brother will be cherished.*

With a surprising amount of tenderness in his heart, Luo Binghe gladly made a very imperfect dinner with Shen Huiying. The noodles were not evenly cooked, there was slightly too much salt and garlic, but... it was nice. It was a meal he would remember forever - if due to the fact that he shared the making of it with someone else.

Try as he might, he did attempt to stifle some of his grievances over the imperfections. He didn't do it well enough. Shen Huiying ended up teasing him, and... he ended up laughing. *Really* laughing.

It was nice.

It was... *family.*

Chapter End Notes

Xiang Fei: well. my bro is trans. this is cool! glad you finally got a body you were comfortable in, and a nice one at that!!

Shen Yuan: *comes into the picture*

Xiang Fei: ....

Xiang Fei: .... whO IS MY CUCUMBER-BRO WHY IS THIS SO DIFFICULT P L E A S E JUST LET ME TALK TO HIM ᕙ(˃̶̤̀ ⍛ ˂̶̤́)ᕗ

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Shen Huiying is ready to fight the Demonic Emperor of all Three Realms for her brother.

The real reason she can't follow them is because she's too powerful.

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

4.4k which is roughly a 19 min reading time.

Honestly I'm really happy that everyone's had such an open reception to Shen Huiying! <3 Thank you everyone for your support!! It honestly means a lot. I am sorry that I am behind on comments. I promise you, I read and appreciate each one. They really make me so happy, and it's really inspiring and fun to see everyone's thoughts!

CW: dark thoughts of terminal illness, thoughts of final goodbyes, and some minor sexual content. Nothing graphic. Reference to physical abuse. Canon-typical violent thoughts.

Dinner was not as painful as Liu Qingge expected it to be. Most of the conversation flowed around him. Both Shen Huiying and Luo Binghe acted as if they had been friends for years, not newly acquainted strangers. There was much of Shen Yuan in his sister; the way she dampened her emotions and pulled on wry smiles, keeping poise when necessary. Though she was more unhindered and playful, unafraid to take up more space and be loud. She especially loved annoying her brother.

Shen Yuan played along with her, often exaggerating his reactions. There was a seamless kinship between the two, but that didn't stop Shen Yuan from reverting into his stern, teacherly voice when he thought Shen Huiying wasn't being responsible. She would groan about him not having any fun.

It… was not all that different from Liu Qingge's own relationship with his sister. He had to be both brother and authoritative figure for her. Though he was able to shuck off most of that responsibility to Xian Shu Peak once his sister could be accepted into the sect. The few years where it was just himself and a child was terrifying.

After dinner came "board games." Shen Huiying exclaimed over one box, holding it above her head saying that she was going to "force her brother to play."

Shen Yuan rolled his eyes and groaned, as if he hadn't excitedly pulled that box out earlier and told Liu Qingge, "We'll have to play this one tonight. It's my sister's favorite." He had worn a fond smile at the time.

The night went by quickly. Not before long Shen Yuan had said goodbye to both his meimei and his er-ge, who had swung by to take his sister home, at the door.

Once the door closed, a delicious silence settled over the apartment. Liu Qingge flopped down onto the couch with a heavy sigh and let his head hang back, his eyes closed. There was shuffled movement throughout the apartment. Shen Yuan put the board games away, and Luo Binghe cleaned the kitchen.

Maybe there was something Liu Qingge should do to help, but he was exhausted. And he also did not want the social interaction of trying to figure out what he could do to help. He sank into the couch cushions and just… listened to the muffled sound. His mind strayed back to the sect and his sister. There was a twisted pang in his chest. He knew he wanted to see Mingyan, and he couldn't help but wonder how she felt.

All she saw was him defending a heavenly demon and turning against the sect. Would she have fallen for Shen Yuan's ruse and believe he was enthralled by the man…? Or would she know better?

He missed her. He missed his peak. He missed his cultivation. He missed nighthunts. He missed it *all.*

Every second here was a little bit like a daydream. It didn't seem real. He had… *sex* with Shen Yuan. After years of pining after the man, years of denial, he was in *love* and loved in return…

And in this world, the man he loved was *dying.*

A dark, quiet panic settled in him. It was the type of panic that was born from an old fear, one that he hadn't dared look at in *years*-

Damp hands caught onto either side of his face and his eyes snapped open.

The mischievous curl of Luo Binghe's lips dulled. He searched Liu Qingge's expression as he leaned over the back of the couch. "A-Bo?"

"Mn?" Liu Qingge thought if he were to play the game with the brat, he should be annoyed at damp hands on his face. At the moment he couldn't summon that little fire within him. He felt hollow and empty, and realized that he longed to be held.

It… was strange to realize that.

"What is Liu-shishu thinking about?" Luo Binghe asked in a quiet murmur. He let go of Liu Qingge's face, just long enough to dry his hands on his shirt, before gently tracing Liu Qingge's eyebrows, nose, and cheeks.

"Mn." Liu Qingge closed his eyes. It was too difficult to translate his brain into words. He wasn't quite sure where to start. As he tried to figure out how, he let himself drift.

The tender touches on his face silenced his brain. If he were honest with himself, he would admit that he wanted to be *more* than held. He wanted to lose himself in pleasure and sex and cling onto both of his beloved and *feel* them. He wanted to hear their breath, feel their

heartbeats, and *know* they were safe. To know, without a single thread of doubt, that both were alive.

“Was that too much?” Shen Yuan asked. By the dip in the couch, he had settled down beside Liu Qingge.

“Mn?”

There was a smile in Luo Binghe’s voice. “I think Gege is fine, Shizun.”

“Brat,” Liu Qingge muttered reflexively upon hearing “gege.”

Soft lips pressed to his brow. He leaned into it, and reached up to catch the back of Luo Binghe’s neck. He lifted and craned himself to kiss the half-demon. The angle was awkward, yet neither wanted to let go. Eventually they broke away, leaving Liu Qingge wanting. He blinked and came to.

Beside him, Shen Yuan stared with parted lips and reddened cheeks. He was such an alluring picture, stuffed into oversized clothes with short hair that was mostly in place.

Before Liu Qingge knew what he was doing, he had grabbed his shixiong and pulled him close. There was a dark shadow in his heart, and *this* was chasing it away. He allowed himself to sink in the revelry that was his beloved gasping against his lips and melting into him.

“Mn,” Shen Yuan murmured, “Q-Qingge… wait-”

Sense crashed into Liu Qingge and he startled, breaking away. He sat up straight and tightened his hands into fists. Horror rocked like a pendulum inside his chest. *This* was why he restrained himself. *This* was why he never indulged. As soon as he did it once, it was harder to stop himself from-

“Shishu did nothing wrong,” Luo Binghe said, voice soft and soothing. He settled in beside Liu Qingge and captured one of his hands in his own, staring into his eyes.

Liu Qingge lowered his head, feeling both relieved and humiliated at being read so easily.

“What? No, of course not,” Shen Yuan quickly said, holding out his hands. He hesitated for half a moment before taking Liu Qingge’s other hand. “No… I just… was worried. Qingge looked so sad before.”

The outlines of old memories had saddened him. There was nothing that could be done to fix his melancholy, so he didn’t quite understand the point of talking about it. They all knew Shen Yuan’s health saddened them all; why would he bring it up again? Why would he tell them that he was worried about his own sister? Especially when it was selfish – soon, the System would return them to their world and he would see her again.

Shen Yuan, on the other hand, would be saying goodbye to his family forever; at least until his next life.

That saddened Liu Qingge, too. There was nothing he could do to change that. Shen Yuan obviously adored his family – his siblings, at least – and would never be able to see them again.

Liu Qingge glanced up at his shixiong, uncertain how to say any of this. "You raised her well," he said, instead.

The quiet whisper of a smile warmed Shen Yuan's face. He set his elbow against the back of the couch, and leaned his head against his hand. "Why are you saying it like that?"

Because I don't know how to tell you that I am sorry for you, Liu Qingge thought, throat closing. *I don't know how to tell you that I am beginning to realize everything you're giving up for us, and it's making me indescribably sad. I wish you didn't have to. I wish you wouldn't do it so gracefully and grieve so quietly. I wish you would let me hurt for you, just so that you knew you weren't alone.*

"You can't look at me like that," Shen Yuan said, voice soft. "You're too pretty to do that."

That sobered Liu Qingge slightly.

Embarrassment colored his shixiong once he realized what he had said. His hand lifted to cover the lower half of his face. Luo Binghe snorted. He leaned forward and rested his chin on Liu Qingge's shoulder.

In his life, Liu Qingge had *hundreds* of people gape and stare at him. They admired or envied his beauty. He never really understood compliments like those. He had never *worked* for his face, it was just how it was. Why compliment him for something he had never chosen or even earned? But somehow, every time he heard either Shen Yuan or Luo Binghe praise his looks, he was flustered.

"That doesn't make sense," Liu Qingge accused.

Shen Yuan smiled, eyes crinkling. "No? What do you think, Binghe?"

"This humble disciple thinks it makes perfect sense," Luo Binghe said, arms wrapping around Liu Qingge's waist.

"Exactly," Shen Yuan said, smiling even wider now.

"You two don't make sense," Liu Qingge huffed, cross. He realized what they were both doing – since he couldn't explain his sadness, they were distracting him from it. It amazed him. Even when Shen Yuan was dealing with so much, the loss of his life and his family, he still was able to tuck it all away to comfort those he cared about.

Shen Yuan leaned back, haughtily. "I think you're outvoted. We make perfect sense."

"Mhmm…" Luo Binghe agreed. He buried his face into Liu Qingge's neck and nipped at his skin.

Grunting, Liu Qingge started to squirm in his hold. “Y-You!” Heat quickly poured over him; the last of his sorrowful mood was snuffed out.

“Shizun, Shishu,” Luo Binghe said, voice deep and low as he fluttered his lashes at the two of them. “Can we have sex again?”

Liu Qingge froze.

Eyes widening, Shen Yuan shrank. His pale skin turned bright red in an instant. “B-Binghe!”

With a needy whine, Luo Binghe dragged himself closer to Liu Qingge. His thighs clamped around him, and he rocked his hips.

He seemed to understand that Liu Qingge needed *no* convincing.

Shen Yuan gulped, eyes dropping to the distracting motion of the half-demon’s hips. His mouth opened and shut. He stammered, “W-We just… last night! *All* night! We have an early morning! My hips are going to *break!”*

“Then…” Luo Binghe pressed his lips to Liu Qingge’s neck. His fingers caught onto the hem of Liu Qingge's shirt, tugging it up to expose his chest. “A-Yuan can watch.”

A hazy, dazed look fluttered over Shen Yuan’s eyes.

Liu Qingge swallowed. “Let’s go.”

All three of them rushed into the bedroom after that.

Blue gleams of light danced around the entire room. Large glass walls encompassed them, with a seemingly endless ocean spreading around and above them. Liu Qingge’s mind was empty. He watched an extremely large and flat creature swim over his head. It had a strange small face, with a mouth that gaped open and shut. Near the center of the room, Luo Binghe sat with Shen Yuan on a bench.

The aquarium was an incredible place with a variety of strange fish and creatures. Liu Qingge had never thought himself to be fascinated by just… *walking* and looking at things, though somehow the quiet space had enraptured him.

He heard Shen Yuan quietly lecturing about the different fish and their habitats, telling strange little tidbits about each of them.

Liu Qingge suspected that their own oceans in their world would have just as much of a variety of strange creatures – just slightly more dangerous.

One particularly fat fish slid against the glass, eying Liu Qingge dumbly. If Shen Yuan hadn't told him (tens of times) that the aquarium was safe and they didn't need to fight anything, Liu Qingge would think the flabby little beast was looking for a fight.

Apparently they were early enough at the aquarium that very few other people were around. Liu Qingge liked it. He was relaxed in a way he never had been before.

(That… partially might have been because of their extensive night. Shen Yuan had ended up joining in, and Liu Qingge's mind had blissfully melted out of his ears. It had been a particularly grueling battle to get his shixiong out of bed this morning. Only the promise of Luo Binghe's food roused him.)

A sound interrupted Shen Yuan's lecture. He pulled out his phone and glowered at the face of it. With a push of a button, he answered, "Airplane."

Liu Qingge ignored the conversation and followed a shark from one side of the room to another. It floated about aimlessly, content to just glide through the waters. It was far too small and weak to be a worthy opponent. Either way, he had to admit that it was fascinating.

"Mingbo," Shen Yuan called, pushing up onto his feet. "It's time to go."

Every time he heard that name it made his heart lurch. His throat dried and the tips of his fingers prickled. Liu Qingge turned towards his two loves. Both watched him with mirroring expressions of fondness. He felt his ears burn. He wondered when he would stop feeling the need to kiss them.

That feeling only seemed to grow the longer he spent time with them.

The three made their way out of the aquarium at a leisurely pace. They had already walked quite a bit. Even if Shen Yuan said nothing, it was easy to see that the meager walk had taken its toll on him.

Outside, hot and muggy air clung to Liu Qingge's skin. It was loud, stinky, and full of bodies. Liu Qingge took point to shoulder people away from Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe, the two trailing close behind him. He had read a local, comprehensive map on Shen Yuan's phone earlier. He knew where they would meet for lunch, and had a much better understanding of the city as a whole.

(Never again would he feel so stranded and helpless. He hated feeling helpless.)

In little to no time, they had made it to a towering building with blacked out windows. Liu Qingge narrowed his eyes at someone who stepped a little too close. He shouldered them so they wouldn't bump into Shen Yuan.

The other figure was tall, perhaps only a few centimeters taller than Liu Qingge. He whirled around with a dangerous expression, eyes narrowing. There was a frosty haughtiness to the way the stranger carried himself, regal and sharp. His eyes assessed Liu Qingge, dragging down his body. It wasn't in a leering way – it was *better*. This man assessed Liu Qingge the way a fighter would.

Liu Qingge's hands itched.

"*Mobei?"*

The regal man's eyes snapped to the side. He drew back his shoulders and crossed his arms. His mouth set into a tight, grim line. His hair was a bluish shade of black, left to drape around his shoulders. After a long, silent moment, he dipped his head and said, "Junshang."

Luo Binghe's lip curled in amused delight. He stepped forward, dragging Liu Qingge behind him in a possessive manner. His fingers dug into Liu Qingge's wrist. "That's a new look."

Junshang. Liu Qingge glanced between the two of them, and let his eyes fall towards Shen Yuan.

Yep. There was a tightness around Shen Yuan's eyes. He was very much *not* looking at Liu Qingge.

Of course Shang Qinghua had been hiding a *demon.* If Liu Qingge's recollection was correct, the Mobei clan was one of the more powerful demon clans. Located somewhere near the north…? He couldn't recall exactly where. He scowled at the demon.

Even if this world had made Mobei human, he still carried himself in a manner that would have outed him as a demon to Liu Qingge immediately. The man held his hands with fingers relaxed and parted in a habitual manner to allow room for lengthy claws. His posture was domineering and threatening. People on the street gave him a wide berth; they understood on a base instinct that this man was *not* to be messed with.

Liu Qingge itched. He wanted to mess with that man. His palms ached to carry Cheng Luan. He wanted to *fight.* By the way this demon carried himself, he would be a formidable opponent. It would be a battle that tested Liu Qingge to his limits.

He *wanted* it.

The demon watched Liu Qingge coolly, something sharp in his eye. He too wanted to test himself against Liu Qingge.

Luo Binghe stepped to break their line of sight. His hold on Liu Qingge tightened. He threw a sharp glance over his shoulder and growled at Liu Qingge, "Do *not* fight him." His dark eyes started to glimmer pathetically. "Fight me instead."

Confusion blanked Liu Qingge. Why…?

"Ah… no one is fighting anyone in broad daylight!" A nervous laugh cut in. "Junshang! Hello! Liu…" A man ducked around Mobei, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. He was reedy with an olive skin tone. Loose curls were tied into a haphazard bun. Freckles danced over his cheekbones.

If Liu Qingge were partially blind and squinted his eyes, the man before him would very, *very* vaguely remind him of Luo Binghe…

“Liu-shidi. Is that weird to say here? That’s probably weird to say,” the man said with a nervous laugh. He rubbed the back of his head.

It was a very familiar gesture. Liu Qingge stared at him. “Shang Qinghua.”

“Ah…” The An Ding peak lord held up his hands with a nervous smile. “Yep! That’s… what you know me as, for sure! Yep.”

“We’re blocking the street,” Shen Yuan piped up, sounding unamused. “Let’s go inside.”

Shang Qinghua’s eyes snapped to him. His mouth dropped open. “Cucumber-bro?”

In terms of height, Shang Qinghua stood almost as tall as Liu Qingge himself. It was Shen Yuan who was the shortest out of all of them, even as he drew himself up and raised his chin pointedly. “Yes?” He raised an eyebrow.

All nervousness fled from Shang Qinghua and his eyes lit up. A large grin spilled across his lips and he said, “Bro! Of *fucking* course you’re hot! What the hell!? You get all the money *and* the looks. I should *hate* you!”

“Hot?” Shen Yuan echoed, flabbergasted and mildly offended.

“You could be an idol or something, what the hell?” Shang Qinghua crossed his arms.

“What the fuck are you on?” Shen Yuan asked, scathingly. He shook his head and waved a hand. “Come on, we’re taking up space on the sidewalk.” He pressed forward and broke through their group, heading inside.

“Oh, my God! You’re so short!”

“If you pick me up, I swear to the gods I’ll knock you out with my cane.”

“*Ha!* How does it feel to be the short one now!?”

“*Fuck you.”*

Somehow they made it into a private room and had only mildly disturbed other patrons of the establishment. Their server seemed more than eager to take their drink order and leave them in their room.

All of them stood awkwardly around the table. Shang Qinghua laughed nervously, hand rubbing the back of his head, as he stared down at his feet. “Well. Um. Hi.”

Liu Qingge eyed him curiously. He wondered at what point Shang Qinghua “transmigrated.” Then again… the man had stated that he “grew up” in the other realm, didn’t he? He wondered how many people would have actually noticed a “personality” change in the An Ding peak lord. He was ambivalent to the man himself. It always felt as if the peak lord would rather keep everyone at a distance, friendly yet not overly so.

Now that they were out of the streets, there were a few more details that Liu Qingge picked up on. The man had bruises on his neck and cheek and scabs on his knuckles. It wasn't too different from his body in the other realm. The only thing missing was his arm in a sling.

"What happened?" Shen Yuan asked, eying the bruises.

"Ah." Shang Qinghua laughed and threw a jittery glance to the side, where Mobei stood.

A dark look colored Shen Yuan's face. He sneered, "It's one thing to push him around in PIDW, but there's no cultivation here! What the *fuck* do you think you're doing!?" He stepped forward, using his cane to jab Mobei in the center of his chest. "You're not a demon here. You're *human.* Have some decency."

"W-What!? Bro-" Shang Qinghua stepped forward to mediate.

"No, it is *not* okay!" Shen Yuan snapped at him. "He doesn't get to treat you like that!"

Shang Qinghua's mouth fell open.

Tensing, both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe stepped forward to protect their beloved.

It was difficult to read Mobei's reaction. He stared down at Shen Yuan before his eyes pulled away. Instead of making any moves against the smaller man, he dipped into an apology and murmured, "This lord has failed."

A nervous sound had started to crawl from Shang Qinghua's throat until the demon spoke. He stared, mouth agape, at the man beside him.

Mobei straightened.

"You did not!" Shang Qinghua yelped. He grabbed the cane, batting it away from Mobei. "Bro, my king did *not* do this to me. I am totally *so* touched right now that you, like, care and all but this was *not* him!"

"This lord failed," Mobei said, again.

"Ahh!" Shang Qinghua grabbed at his hair. "No! Nope! You really didn't! It was just some jackasses and Mobei kicked their asses afterwards, *please* Cucumber-bro, do *not* piss off my king!"

Shen Yuan stepped back. He glanced between the two of them with confusion denting his eyebrow. With a huff, he straightened his shoulders and glowered. "Airplane, if you need a safe place-"

"*Bro,"* Shang Qinghua threw his hands into the air. "No! I am *good.* I am so good. I will not leave my king."

The demon's expression warmed ever so slightly. He looked as pleased as a cat that had caught a rather fat fish.

After a few more scrambled assurances from Shang Qinghua, all five of them sat down; Shang Qinghua and his demon on one side and the three of them on the other. The server came back in with beverages and took their food orders before hastily leaving the room once more.

"Um," Shang Qinghua said, squirming in his seat. "By the way, it's uh… Xiang Fei."

After a thoughtful silence, Shen Yuan introduced himself. Then for the sake of Mobei, he introduced Liu Qingge. It was not lost on Liu Qingge that the demon was not introduced nor was Luo Binghe introduced to said demon. He rolled his eyes inwardly.

Later, he would bother with asking about it. Now they had things to talk about. Shen Yuan sat in the middle with Luo Binghe on the other side. The half-demon had been pouting pretty much the entire morning, and his mood wasn't any better now that they were *here.*

"What's going on with the System, bro?" Xiang Fei asked.

Shen Yuan sat back as he considered the question. "You… really don't know anything, do you?"

"Bro, that sounds so fucking ominous, please I am *begging you."* Xiang Fei pressed his hands together in a pleading manner. "Just straight up explain something *for once."*

The corner of Liu Qingge's lip quirked.

With a heavy sigh, Shen Yuan crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. He did as he was asked and recounted what they knew so far. When he mentioned Luo Binghe's part in it all, Xiang Fei burrowed his face in his hands and murmured something about an "OP son." Whatever that meant. Shen Yuan explained what he could with what was happening with the System – hopping between worlds, the effects on their bodies, and included Luo Binghe's insights on the System siphoning their energies in an attempt to stabilize itself.

It was clear from Xiang Fei's point of view that he hadn't even known how many days had passed since the start of it all. Where the three of them at least had the support of the sect, he was blind and on his own. "I don't get why *my* System is fucked like yours."

"It's the same entity," Luo Binghe said, coldly. He stared at Xiang Fei like he was an ant and a waste of his time. "Imagine if you lost a hand. You're still bleeding. It affects *all* of you. Not just the hand you lost."

Xiang Fei laughed nervously and thanked the half-demon for his explanation, while also hiding both of his hands under the table.

Overall, while Liu Qingge was indifferent about his shixiong, he didn't have any *ill will* towards him. He disliked the fact that an entire peak lord was missing and going through as much shit as they were, and the sect hadn't even noticed. Granted, there was the fact that a *demon* was involved – Liu Qingge would get answers on that *later* – but the fact that his own martial sibling was facing something like this on his *own*...

It bothered him.

As the conversation died down, Liu Qingge quietly said, “Tell him about Huan Hua.” He thought it would be best to update his shixiong on *everything* that was happening, and not just with the System.

“Ah, yes,” Luo Binghe said, prettily leaning forward and fluttering his eyelashes innocently. “Shizun should *definitely* update Shang-shishu on the events that occurred right before we came back to this world.”

Shen Yuan’s lips twitched towards a grimace. His face turned bright red.

“Bro…” Xiang Fei raised an eyebrow, warily. “What happened? What did you do?”

With a heavy sigh, Shen Yuan pinched the bridge of his nose. “*Fine.”* Warily, he explained the events *surrounding* whatever was going on with the System.

Liu Qingge hadn’t meant to bring it up as a means of ridicule. Though, it was somewhat amusing to see his beloved attempt to dismiss and understate the mess he had made. Despite his cool composure, his face was bright red.

At the very least, Xiang Fei’s reaction to it all was *extremely* satisfying.

“Bro. What. the. *FUCK!?”*

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

2.8k which is roughly a 13 minute reading time.

Sorry for the short and late chapter this week!

My health hasn't been great (again). I might take a break next week to catch up on a few chapters and have some backlog, but we will see how this next week goes!

Content Warning: Chronic illness, chronic pain

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The System should have pulled them back into PIDW by now. Shen Yuan hadn't thought that a meeting with Airplane was all that necessary, considering that there was nothing they could do while waiting around in this world. When they had made plans, he expected that none of them would be able to make it.

Instead, Shen Yuan now sat at a table in a restaurant with quiet pains sponging all over his body. He actually disliked hard wooden chairs and sitting at tables. The stiff furniture always accentuated the aches. He dragged his attention back to the conversation at hand, and ignored the way exhaustion hunted him like a dog to a wounded rabbit.

Xiang Fei had confessed over text that he was actually really anxious about meeting up – which Shen Yuan didn't understand. It wasn't as if they had never met before. Xiang Fei had compared it to meeting an internet friend for the first time in person, but Shen Yuan never had *internet friends.* At least none that he was interested in meeting up with. Technically, the hack author wasn't even an "internet friend." He wasn't even a *friend.*

Despite his internal grumblings about Xiang Fei being dramatic, Shen Yuan had to admit that there had been a moment. It happened outside the restaurant, when Xiang Fei had first fluttered out from behind Mobei-Jun. A little bud of nerves had sprouted in his chest.

It was sort of a feeling similar to being without his fan; he could no longer hide any involuntary faces he made. Except that… this face wasn't who Shen Yuan was anymore. It was who he *had been.*

Any trace of anxiety was smashed when Xiang Fei had called him "hot." He claimed that Shen Yuan had stolen all the looks, whatever the fuck that meant.

Light leaked in through the windows of their private dining room and spilled over the table. Sitting across from the squirrelly man, Shen Yuan quietly studied him. His fellow transmigrator was… interesting. He was jittery and flinched at the smallest provocation, not

unlike his counterpart. At the same time, he wore a grin like it was the easiest thing in the world. It lit up the room and warmed his dark brown eyes. He wasn't a classic beauty by any standard, though that didn't mean that there wasn't some *allure.*

It was still hard to connect this man to the An Ding peak lord. Both acted similarly, but physically they were near opposites.

Shang Qinghua was small and soft, with curves and a rounded face; Xiang Fei was all limbs with sharp angles.

(There… was the discomforting fact that if Shen Yuan unfocused his eyes, Xiang Fei vaguely reminded him of someone…)

"*Ahh,*" Xiang Fei fumed, digging his fingers through his hair. "What the *fuck,* bro!? Why would you do that!?"

Shen Yuan had almost forgotten what they were talking about. Right. His excellent and well thought-out plan. He lifted his tea and sipped it with a detached air. Embarrassment warmed the shells of his ears, and he ignored the restrained amusement in the men on either side of him. *Traitors,* he thought.

"They were painting Binghe as a villain," Shen Yuan answered with a sniff.

"Bro." Xiang Fei wiped a hand over his face. He pressed his fingers against his temple. "He's the *protagonist!!* What do you think is going to happen to him!? It's *Luo. Bing. He!"*

"The System is all fucked up!" Shen Yuan protested. "It can't protect him anymore!"

"*He's Luo fucking Binghe!"* Xiang Fei shouted in return. "Bro! So what if the cultivation world is a little upset at him!? He'd just cut open a rift to his *fucking palace.* Because he is an *emperor,* my man."

There was a soft knock on the door. Shen Yuan quickly straightened after throwing Xiang Fei a withering glare. He lightly called, "Come in."

It was only as his attention shifted off of Xiang Fei that he realized that the two of them were arguing as they usually did, even though there was an audience. An audience who they were very much talking about as if they weren't there. He cast a glance towards Luo Binghe who wore a mixed expression of amusement and bafflement.

Nervous servers entered the room. They quickly went around and set down their food. Once the door was closed again, Xiang Fei pointed his chopsticks at Shen Yuan. "You're such an idiot."

Frustration sparked through Shen Yuan. He threw a glare at the hack author. "The mushroom bodies-"

"Aren't *close* to being done!" Xiang Fei threw his hands in the air.

“Binghe doesn’t have Xin Mo,” Shen Yuan snapped at him. “He can’t just *teleport* away without it!”

“What the *fuck* did you do to Xin Mo!?”

“I didn’t do *anything!* Mu-shidi had it seized by Wei-shidi for Binghe’s health.”

The fight drained out of Xiang Fei. His eyes widened in horror. “Holy shit.”

“Yes, *holy shit.*” Shen Yuan crossed his arms. “Fuck you.”

Xiang Fei’s head dropped back into his hands. He stared wide-eyed. “...do they *know…?”*

“Mu-shidi knows,” Shen Yuan said with a nod.

“What?” Xiang Fei asked. “And… he just… *what?* Patted Luo Binghe on the back and let a… *you-know-what* prance around the sect!?”

“He was actually really thoughtful,” Shen Yuan reflected. He sat back in his seat. “He had paralyzed Binghe before we all woke up, and pushed Qingge out of the room to talk to me alone. After he made sure we didn’t want to harm anyone in the sect, he let us go.”

Xiang Fei dropped his hands to gawk at him.

“Mu Qingfang knows?” Liu Qingge asked, brow furrowed. “About Binghe.”

Shen Yuan turned to him, “Yes. Sorry, Qingge…” He winced. “This master didn’t mean to keep Binghe’s origins from you for so long; it was Binghe’s secret to tell.”

The war god snorted and rolled his eyes. “Found out before. You two are idiots.”

“Hold on.” Xiang Fei waved his hands as if asking for mercy. “Liu Qingge, the War God of Bai Zhan, is *okay* with Luo Binghe being a *heavenly demon?”*

Liu Qingge glared.

With a squeak, Xiang Fei seemed to realize that they were talking about real people now, and that those people were in the room with them. He shrank back against Mobei-Jun, who had not stopped glowering since the start of this entire exchange.

“Gege knew the entire time,” Luo Binghe purred, setting his head on his hand as he fluttered his lashes at Liu Qingge.

Xiang Fei’s face twisted. *“Gege!?”*

A deep blush spilled over Liu Qingge’s face. He scowled at Luo Binghe. “You!”

A brilliant smile spilled across Luo Binghe’s face. He leaned into Shen Yuan’s space and set his chin on his shoulder, coyly looking at the war god through his lashes. “Apologizing to Shishu,” he murmured in a low, rumbly voice.

“Only apologize if you mean it!” Liu Qingge reached out and meanly pinched his cheek.

With a whine, Luo Binghe buried his face into Shen Yuan’s neck. “Shizun, Shishu is being mean!”

Rolling his eyes, Shen Yuan rubbed his back consolingly. “Maybe if you stopped being such a brat, your shishu wouldn’t punish you.”

Luo Binghe glanced up at him, eyes sparkling. It stole Shen Yuan’s breath away. There was a time when Shen Yuan had thought that he would never get to see such an expression on his disciple’s face again. Certainly not directed at *him.*

But now… the protagonist was so happy. There were no restraints to his smiles; nothing holding him back from feeling utterly and completely content. His fingers trailed along the side of Luo Binghe’s face. He hadn’t even realized he had raised his hand until his disciple nuzzled into his palm and looked up at him with dark, adoring eyes.

“...oh.”

Shen Yuan stiffened. He had somehow managed to forget that other people were here! *Ah, Binghe! What are you doing, making eyes like this in public!?* He quickly dropped his hand and shoved his unruly disciple back into his own chair. He let out a little cough into his hand as his cheeks scorched.

“...you *bent* my protagonist,” Xiang Fei said, disbelieving.

“It wasn’t me!” Shen Yuan snapped at him, mortified. “It was Qingge! *Look at him!* Who can resist that!?*”*

Xiang Fei glanced over at the pretty war god. After blinking a few times, as if he were trying to wake himself, he turned back to Shen Yuan. “You… the plot. The plot.”

“The plot is *so* off the rails, you have no idea,” Shen Yuan said with a heavy sigh.

Eyebrows pinching together, Xiang Fei shook his head in disbelief. There was a desperate haze in his eyes. “You… *changed* the plot.” His voice shook with feeling.

“Binghe broke the System,” Shen Yuan reminded him.

Xiang Fei planted his hands on the table and sprung up. “Shen Yuan. You *changed* the plot! You *bent* the protagonist!”

“Why are you repeating yourself!?” Shen Yuan snapped. “I told you, Qingge-”

“No, bro-” Xiang Fei marveled at him, eyes glistening. His voice cracked. “You *changed* things. You changed it. You managed…” He swallowed. “You’re not going to die. You… you made him *happy.”* His eyes shifted and he stared at Luo Binghe as if he were seeing a mirage. “He’s happy.”

There was something *else* that Xiang Fei was saying. Shen Yuan glanced between the author and the demon at his side. In PIDW, Shang Qinghua's fate was to die at the hands of Mobei-Jun. Both Shen Yuan and Xiang Fei knew their fates and had prepared for it, trying to figure out ways to endure it and escape it.

Everything was different now.

Xiang Fei deflated and sank back into his chair.

"What happens to Shang Qinghua in the book?" Liu Qingge asked with a frown.

Xiang Fei flinched.

Beside him, Mobei-Jun stirred. He narrowed his eyes at the thin man beside him, waiting.

With a nervous laugh, Xiang Fei lifted his hands into the air and said, "Ahhh… that doesn't really matter, Liu-shidi! We have more pressing matters, since our *excellent strategist shixiong* decided that the best plan of action was to throw himself down on a sword!" He glanced between both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge and amended, "I guess that's two swords."

"You-" Shen Yuan grabbed a pair of chopsticks and threw them. "Shut up!"

Laughing, Xiang Fei dodged. He grinned.

They eventually settled down and returned to their meal. By the persistent frown on Liu Qingge's face, Shen Yuan wondered if he was going to be questioned later. He lit a candle in his heart for himself and for Xiang Fei. He was somewhat surprised by the slight camaraderie between Luo Binghe and Mobei-Jun. While Xiang Fei and Shen Yuan took up most of the conversation at the table, the two would often split off into quiet side conversations.

During one such conversation, Mobei-Jun quietly glanced to the side and said, "Junshang. This one would like a word. Privately."

With a curious glint in his eye, Luo Binghe nodded and said, "When this meal is finished, we can head out first."

While Shen Yuan was a bit curious on what the two had to discuss, he knew it wasn't his place to pry. If it was important, he trusted that Luo Binghe would tell him. He did wonder if he should pull the protagonist aside and ask for him to protect Xiang Fei down the road if Mobei-Jun ever wanted to turn on him.

"Bro," Xiang Fei said, tugging his hair. "What the fuck are we supposed to do now that the entire cultivation world wants your ass?"

Rolling his eyes, Shen Yuan pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's *fine."*

"First," Luo Binghe said, "where is Mobei and the rat in PIDW?"

“Uh…” Xiang Fei shrank. “Just… in my leisure house. No one knows I am back, though, so-”

“Back?” Liu Qingge echoed with a frown.

“Zhangmen-shixiong summoned the entire sect to save his precious Xiao-Jiu,” Xiang Fei answered with an eyeroll. “Did anyone say anything about me disappearing that night?”

Liu Qingge’s frown deepened. “No.”

With a nervous laugh, Xiang Fei held up his hands. “Ah, Liu-shidi! My bad, my bad! I’m certain it was really helpful having Zhangmen-shixiong so quickly gather-”

Grunting, Liu Qingge shook his head. “No. They didn’t notice.”

Xiang Fei stopped. He blinked a few times. His hands settled in his lap. “No. I don’t suppose they did.”

The war god let out a frustrated breath.

“No one will go into your leisure house?” Shen Yuan asked.

“No, my disciples know better than that!” Xiang Fei said with a tittering laugh. He glanced nervously over at Mobei-Jun. “I have that place *warded.* Wards on wards.”

Mobei-Jun nodded. “Mn.”

“Your arm,” Liu Qingge pointed out. “It was broken.”

“...yes?”

“You didn’t go to Qian Cao.”

Xiang Fei looked confused. “No..? I couldn’t drag Mobei– Ah! Wait, I see.” He smiled. “No, Mu Qingfang doesn’t know I am back either. No one does. There’s no reason for anyone to be worried if I don’t answer my door! It… was honestly a surprise that Cucumber-bro stopped by!”

“People saw us walk through An Ding to visit you,” Luo Binghe pointed out.

All the color washed from Xiang Fei’s face.

With a grunt, Mobei-Jun scowled. “It will be fine.”

“...just in case,” Shen Yuan broached. “We… should probably come up with a few plans.”

The next hour, they came up with contingency plans once the System was back online and returned them to PIDW. There were plans set in place if Xiang Fei and Mobei-Jun were discovered and the demon lord was imprisoned. They also altered their current plans with the three of them. Now that Mobei-Jun was in the picture, they had a better method if the three of

them had been separated. The demon had a spell tied to both Shang Qinghua and Luo Binghe that helped him locate and teleport to them should the need arise. They only had to worry about Liu Qingge and locate him quickly before any permanent damage was done.

Now they just had to… wait.

At the end of the meal, Xiang Fei and Shen Yuan stalled to allow the demons more time for their private conversation. As an afterthought, Shen Yuan said, "Mu Qingfang knows I'm a transmigrator."

Xiang Fei, who had been about to leave the room, whirled around so fast that he slammed his elbow into the doorframe. He whimpered, holding onto his arm, and watched at him incredulously. "What the hell?"

"He figured it out," Shen Yuan explained. "After some extensive medical tests. I think because the System was down, it wasn't able to hide anymore?" He shrugged. "Either way, there were more pressing things to worry about so he was fine with it for now."

Rolling his eyes, Xiang Fei groaned. "Of *course* Mu Qingfang knows. And of course he's *totally* okay with it, as long as it's *you!"*

Waving a hand through the air, Shen Yuan said, "That's only because we have the entire cultivation world to worry about. He still wants me to tell Yue Qingyuan."

Xiang Fei cringed. "Rest in fucking pieces," he said, patting Shen Yuan on the back. "Give a bro a heads up before you do that, will you? I'll have my king take me to the other side of the world when that nuclear bomb goes off."

"A-Yuan will be fine," Liu Qingge said, stubbornly. He glowered at the touch.

Holding his hands up in a surrendering gesture, Xiang Fei stepped away. "Oh, I see we've upgraded from just 'Yuan.' Cool. Anyways." He escaped out of the room and rushed down the stairs.

Shen Yuan smiled, biting back a laugh. Once a coward, always a coward. He eased after the other transmigrator, using the handrail on the stairwell to support his slow descent. He felt partially bad for taking so long, but Liu Qingge exuded nothing but an everlasting patience behind him.

By the time they stepped outside, Xiang Fei was excitedly chatting to Mobei-Jun. His eyes lit up as he stared up at the demon, clinging to his arm in a manner that didn't seem intentional. The demon lord had his head inclined towards him. It was hard to read his expression, but Shen Yuan somehow began to doubt that they had to worry about Shang Qinghua's fate in the novel.

As he stepped beside Luo Binghe, Shen Yuan quietly asked, "He's safe, isn't he?"

The corner of Luo Binghe's lip curled with mischievous delight. His eyes glittered. "Shizun doesn't have to worry about *that man* getting hurt by Mobei." He raised an eyebrow. "He

should still worry about other things though."

Xiang Fei jolted once he realized that he was clinging onto Mobei-Jun. He sprung back with his hands out, apologizing profusely and begging forgiveness.

"Idiot," Liu Qingge said with a sigh.

They said their goodbyes with the vague promise of meeting up again if they didn't return to PIDW within the next few days.

Though, they should be returning… soon.

(They… should have returned already…)

Chapter End Notes

There was soooo much I had to cut out this chapter, if only because it is so easy to write XF and SY going off on their own world. They kept wanting to derail things and talk about nonsense. (Characters have minds of their own, I swear!!)

One of my favorites:

After LQG asks about SQH's fate in PIDW
MBJ: This lord will read the book.
SQH: *starts choking*
LBH, thoroughly amused: Oh? You will?
LQG: *pinches the bridge of his nose*
SQH: you... you guys didn't read it. PLEASE tell me you didn't-
SY: of COURSE they didn't read it!!!! They only know so much because YOU-
LQG: We read it.
LBH: *smirking threateningly*
SQH:
SY:
SQH: AAHHHHHH!!?!?!?!?!??!!?!??!!?!?
SY: *soul leaving his body*

The scene might show up again... either in this fic or in SQH's POV... we'll see.

Also, minor spoiler: I wanted to give a little preparation for you guys: expect some time skipping! Also expect for things to get a little dire. But have faith in me, I promise everything will turn out in the end!

You've trusted me this far, haven't you...?

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

About 5.7k with about a 24 minute reading time.

Hello everyone!! Thank you so much for your patience! My health took a bit of a dip. On a bright note, if you noticed, we have a chapter count now!!

Hopefully we're back on our regular schedule 🙏

CW: Trauma/Trauma Responses, Cliffhanger, a bit of the Luo Binghe Special? Sexual content (allusions to sex, nothing explicit in chapter.)

(I think that's everything. If there's anything else you feel strongly about, please let me know!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All plans were made. Contingencies were accounted for. Now they just had to… wait. Liu Qingge stared up, watching the clouds drift. Birds fluttered amongst the impossibly tall buildings. The three of them stood on the curb, passing the time in silence until a driver came to pick them up. Liu Qingge's limbs itched. He was… fine with waiting. He could wait. Waiting would be… okay.

His fingers twitched.

He wasn't a mathematician or known for his scholarly pursuits, but he wasn't stupid. If they were following the pattern, they should be returning to PIDW tonight at the latest.

(They should have returned already… right?)

There was something off about Luo Binghe. When he thought no one was looking, his face fell. It almost looked… bleak. Liu Qingge observed him out of the corner of his eye and tried to figure out what the emotional little half-demon could be upset about now. There was the possibility that something happened during his conversation with Xiang Fei's demon.

That reminded Liu Qingge.

His arms crossed and he scowled. He loved both of these idiots, but *fuck* if it wasn't frustrating that they kept withholding information from him. Both kept assuming he would react badly. Did they realize he would react *worse* if he found out they were *hiding* it from him!? He huffed, wanting to yell at both of them.

But he didn’t have the words for it. Yet.

Both were saved when a sleek, sharp car pulled up to the curb. The three filed into the back. There wasn’t much room, so Liu Qingge sat in the middle with Shen Yuan plastered on one side and Luo Binghe on the other. Both were lost in thought. Liu Qingge wanted to talk about Mobei, but unfortunately now wasn’t the time. He would just have to wait.

(Liu Qingge was *really* good at waiting.)

His jaw creaked. He started to jog his knee, jostling Shen Yuan. The man didn’t say anything. He was spaced out and fatigued, exhaustion tugging on his shoulders. Thoughtlessly, he reached out a hand and placed it on Liu Qingge’s knee. The touch seemed more of a comfort, rather than a quiet request to stop. So Liu Qingge didn’t.

The traffic was slow.

Many cars made angry noises and there was a lot stopping and going.

Liu Qingge could be patient.

(He kept sighing through his nose and rolling his head around to relieve the tension in his neck.)

Their driver smiled apologetically in the mirror and said something in another language.

Shen Yuan stirred just enough to answer.

The driver attempted to continue the conversation but it died off once Shen Yuan turned back to his window.

Some music played in the background. It was too quiet to really catch any of the notes, and so it was just a vague irritant. Liu Qingge felt every fucking passing second. At this point, it might have been faster to *walk* back to their apartment. He was about to lose his mind. He needed to get out of the car. He needed to be back in PIDW so he could fly off to wherever and deal with whatever.

Instead, the car braked and a loud noise came from it as the driver shouted at the other cars.

This was fine. Liu Qingge could *wait.*

He was *so good* at waiting.

(Why weren’t they back by now?)

Before they went up to the apartment, Shen Yuan showed them the "gym." Liu Qingge itched. He stared at the alien equipment. A few other individuals occupied the large, exuberant space. A woman lifted heavy, weighted bars in front of a mirror. On the far side of the room, someone sprinted at impressive speeds without moving an inch. Ultimately, he decided that he didn't want to work out in his current clothes and that he needed to have a conversation with his loves. He *refused* to let things stand as they were.

On the elevator ride up, Shen Yuan tiredly explained that Liu Qingge could look up how to use the machines on his phone. He leaned heavily against the wall of the elevator, mindlessly scrolling on his phone without actually reading anything on the screen.

Liu Qingge glanced up and caught Luo Binghe's expression. For a split second, the man looked as if Shen Yuan had died right then and there. His expression was agonized with guilt and grief. As soon as he noticed Liu Qingge looking at him, the look dissolved and he was smiling brightly.

The elevator doors opened. Shen Yuan led the way down the hall, head lowered. He didn't see the man waiting by the front door of his apartment. The man had a welcoming expression; charismatic and warm. He had the type of face where the corner of his lip always looked half a second away from pulling into a smile. His dark eyes landed on Shen Yuan, and instantly they crinkled with warmth. He cast curious glances towards both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge. If he was startled by them at all, he didn't show it. He nodded to both as he held up his phone and pointed the camera towards Shen Yuan.

Both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe drew to a stop. Surprised, Shen Yuan gave them a confused glance. He saw them both staring ahead and turned. His breath hitched in his throat and he froze.

"Xiao-Yuan" the man said with a wide smile.

"Da-ge," Shen Yuan choked. He fell forward a few steps, disbelief bright in his eyes.

Laughter tumbled from the eldest brother. He closed the distance between them and immediately snatched Shen Yuan up in his arms. He was tall enough to tuck Shen Yuan's head under his chin, holding him tight to his chest. "How is it you always cry when you see me, Yuan-di?"

The question seemed to snap Shen Yuan out of his reverie. He snapped, "Shut up!" and elbowed his brother angrily. "I am *not* crying!"

"I have the evidence right here!" His da-ge teased, holding up his phone. "This one gets added to the family album."

"Shut up!"

The two brothers wrestled – well, to say "wrestled" would be a hyperbole. It was mostly Shen Yuan slapping and elbowing his older brother as the phone was held away from him. Once Shen Yuan stopped attempting to get the phone, he realized he was being smothered in a hug. His face turned red, and his efforts turned to trying to escape. "Let *go!"*

Beside Liu Qingge, Luo Binghe was grinning.

It was fun seeing the different sides of Shen Yuan. The peak lord. The shizun. The older brother. The youngest brother.

“Ah… Xiao-Yuan is so mean! It’s been *years* since his da-ge has seen him!” The eldest brother complained. He wrapped Shen Yuan up in his arms and rubbed his cheek against the top of his head.

“You’re supposed to be on a business trip. What the hell are you doing here?” Shen Yuan shoved his brother’s face back with his hand and used it to try and keep space between the two. After a few moments, he added, “And… it’s only been a week!”

“Why does that sound like a question?” The eldest brother said with a pout. “Has my precious Xiao-Yuan already forgotten how much he loves me!?”

“Die!” Shen Yuan shouted.

The two struggled for a bit longer, with Shen Yuan trying to escape and his older brother refusing to let go. Once indignation and a real fire of anger lit Shen Yuan’s eyes, his eldest brother let him go. He smiled warmly and said, “The conference ended early.”

“You’re such a bad liar,” Shen Yuan muttered. He reached up to fix his hair.

With a small hum, the eldest brother reached out and gently fixed it for him. Once that was done, he turned to both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe and greeted them formally. His playfulness with Shen Yuan folded away behind an unflappable smile. “Thank you for taking care of my Xiao-Yuan.”

Sneering, Shen Yuan hit his leg with his cane. “Go back to America! No one wants you here!” Despite his harsh words, he didn’t move away when his brother laughed and hooked an arm around his shoulder.

Luo Binghe stepped in and said, “Would A-Yuan’s da-ge like to stay for dinner?”

It was hard not to show a reaction to Luo Binghe’s question. Liu Qingge sighed inwardly. As selfish as it was, he desperately wanted Shen Yuan’s brother to refuse.

With a thoughtful hum, the eldest turned to his brother. After reading the look in Shen Yuan’s eye, he nodded and said, “If you do not mind having me.”

As it turned out, the conversation with Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe would have to wait.

That… was fine.

Liu Qingge was… *patient*.

The entire night, Liu Qingge kept waiting for the telltale signs of the System dragging them back to their home world. It never happened. He was restless enough that Luo Binghe dragged him into the kitchen and set him to work. Every single minute dragged by. They prepared the meal. Then set up the table. Then they sat around the table. The eldest brother took Shen Yuan's usual seat and it messed up their eating order.

Not that it was his fault. It…

Everything was just *wrong.*

Despite the appetizing allure of the food, Liu Qingge barely ate. He probably should have engaged more than he did. When he was asked direct questions, he answered. But he didn't jump into any of the conversations. Luo Binghe, on the other hand, had pulled out his most charismatic mask and it was as if someone had poured the entire luminance of the sun into his smile.

(Why did it feel like they were meeting Shen Yuan's parents?)

At some point he had missed the introductions and it seemed like too much work to ask after the eldest's name. He had already expended so many words earlier that day with Xiang Fei and his demon. All of his social cards had been played, and all he wanted to do was to go home. He wanted to see his sister. He wanted to fight Yue Qingyuan. He just… didn't want to be *here* anymore.

It was selfish and childish. He knew himself well enough that the itch in his mind came from lack of action. But there was nothing to *act on.*

Luo Binghe noted Liu Qingge's mood and, after dinner was finished, dragged him back outside. Before they left, the four of them lingered around the front door in an extended farewell.

The eldest pulled some more information out of the two of them, intrigued about how they all met.

Somehow Luo Binghe managed to skirt around answering with too many details. Both Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe jumped in to answer when the question was directed at Liu Qingge. He was in no mood to try and come up with a lie and did not want to.

Though, as Luo Binghe and he left the apartment, there was a thoughtful look in the eldest brother's eyes. Oh well.

Shen Yuan could deal with that.

The two walked around the city, always staying within a block of Shen Yuan's apartment. Sensing Liu Qingge's mood, Luo Binghe stayed silent and allowed him to lead the way. The two ended up in a large space free of any buildings. He had seen it on the map – a large body

of water, some trees, and a lot of other greenery. With the fading daylight, not too many people lingered.

Liu Qingge wordlessly stepped onto a path and began walking it.

The pathway turned into the forest. As soon as trees surrounded them on all sides, Liu Qingge's shoulders relaxed. He could hardly even hear any cars. His feet drew to a stop and he closed his eyes and let his head roll back. He breathed in.

Trees whispered around him, leaves trembling in the soft breeze. Fingers hesitantly caught around his. He glanced beside him.

With a gentle smile, Luo Binghe motioned for Liu Qingge to keep moving. He guided the two of them down the path, continuously looking for something. They walked some distance before Luo Binghe drew to a stop. Then he tugged Liu Qingge towards some bushes where a lone lamppost sat.

It was difficult to see, but beyond the lamppost was a thin dirt path. It led to an isolated sitting area, slightly elevated. Luo Binghe brought Liu Qingge there and sat.

When Liu Qingge turned, he saw that they had a view of the lake. He sank down beside Luo Binghe. They sat without speaking for some time, enjoying the near silence. Closing his eyes, Liu Qingge could pretend they were back in their world. This deep into the park, he could hardly even hear any sirens.

Time passed. There was no longer any light in the sky. Luo Binghe had taken his hand and threaded their fingers together, leaning against him. The breeze chased his curls.

Luo Binghe stirred. "A-Bo."

Heart jolting, Liu Qingge answered, "Mn?"

Turning to him, Luo Binghe caught the side of his face and pulled him closer. This close, the darkness made his eyes fathomless. There was an alluring curl to the corner of his lips. "There's something important this Binghe needs to tell you."

Liu Qingge was somewhat aware of another hand catching onto his waist and drawing him closer. He managed to make a sound as a question.

Eyes curving with his smile, Luo Binghe said, "I love you." Then he kissed him.

Heat burst through Liu Qingge. His heart pounded. He kissed him in return. It was a languid, slow thing, full of tender warmth and feeling. Desperately, Liu Qingge wanted to tell him, *I love you, too.* He wanted to be able to say the words freely – wanted to tell both Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe how much he cared for them.

The words wouldn't come to him.

He tried to think of all the people he had said "I love you" to. His sister, surely? And his mother… right?

He was frustrated and angry with himself that it was so difficult to say. He knew he felt it, wholly without any restraint.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

It wasn't as if anything held him back from loving either of them.

He was jealous that Luo Binghe could speak it so freely. Again and again. To remind them how much he loved both of them.

I love you.

"I know that," Liu Qingge answered, instead.

Smiling, Luo Binghe brought him closer. He laughed, and before Liu Qingge could demand why, he kissed him again. And again. The brat already seemed to have mastered kissing, softening his incessant bites with gentle brushes of his lips and tongue.

He kissed away all lingering noise of Liu Qingge's thoughts, wiping his mind deliciously clean.

By the time they made it back to the apartment, they found Shen Yuan sprawled out on the couch, asleep. His phone was beside him on the low table, open to the app that showed both Luo Binghe's and Liu Qingge's location. Emotion swelled in Liu Qingge's chest. He couldn't stop himself from bending over the back of the couch and laying a kiss on Shen Yuan's cheek.

The man barely stirred.

Keeping quiet, both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge prepared to go to sleep. They turned out the lights, put away the dishes, and carried Shen Yuan to bed and tucked him in. As soon as Liu Qingge slid into the middle, the man rolled to him and curled into his warmth.

Despite the comfort, Liu Qingge could not sleep.

He lay in bed, waiting and wishing for the three of them to return to the other world. It did not happen.

Every hour that passed in this realm, more passed in the other. It felt as if the days were falling through his fingers like sand.

When he finally managed to get to sleep, he had a dream that they had returned to PIDW but over a hundred years had passed and the other peak lords had already ascended. He had spent most of the dream running around, trying to find his sister but no one recognized her name.

He startled awake to screaming.

It was an awful sound. Full of desperation and heartbreak. Luo Binghe tore at the blankets, terrified, and fell from the bed. His scream cut off into a desperate, heavy sob. "*Please,* I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm sorry.* Please, please… *please…"* He cried out, a heartwrenching, animalistic sound ripping from his throat.

Liu Qingge was trying to free himself to get out of the bed.

On the other side of him, Shen Yuan had managed to slip out. He only took a few steps before his body gave out and he collapsed onto the ground. "*Binghe!"*

The sobs cut off.

Liu Qingge finally untangled himself and turned on a light.

Curled into a small ball, Luo Binghe lay on the floor with both of his hands covering his mouth. He tried to silence his sobs. His entire body trembled.

Throat tight, Liu Qingge reached down to comfort him.

Luo Binghe jerked away, eyes widening in fear.

Still on the ground on the other side of the bed, Shen Yuan pleaded, "Binghe. Binghe. Come here."

Pieces of the waking world were coming back to Luo Binghe. Liu Qingge watched as the dream – the *nightmare* – began to fade from the forefront of his mind. The terror gradually shifted to horror as Luo Binghe realized what he had done. His eyes flicked from Liu Qingge to under the bed, where he could see Shen Yuan on the ground.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan ordered. "Come here. *Right now."* His voice was sharp and stern, though it shook with his worry.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe croaked. "Shishu. This lowly-"

"*Binghe. Come here, goddamnit!"* Shen Yuan shouted.

A sob startled from Luo Binghe. Tears filled his eyes and he shrank. Lower lip trembling, he forced himself to move. He crawled around the bed and met with his shizun at the foot of it. There, Shen Yuan grabbed him and tugged him into his arms. He wrapped around Luo Binghe, holding him close while running a hand over his hair and down his back. "Oh, Binghe… Binghe…"

"I'm sorry," Luo Binghe croaked. He tried to stop his trembling, and failed. "Shizun, this lowly one is sorry. He didn't mean to wake you-"

"Hush," Shen Yuan told him, sharply. "Who is lowly? What needs to be forgiven?" His hands shook.

Slowly, Liu Qingge rose from the bed. He eased down to the ground beside Luo Binghe, the way one might approach a startled animal, with his hands held out. He set a questioning hand on Luo Binghe's side.

A wet, shuddering breath filled Luo Binghe. He turned just enough to grab that hand like a lifeline.

It was then that Liu Qingge noticed that the half-demon was latched onto his shizun. His trembling eased, but gave way to the hitches of tears and soundless sobs. "This Binghe is sorry," he said again. "This Binghe-"

"Binghe," Liu Qingge murmured. He squeezed Luo Binghe's hand and moved to lay atop him. Now that the nightmare had faded completely, it was alright to touch him. He pressed his entire weight down on Luo Binghe and wrapped his free arm around his waist. He pulled him in close, securing him. "You're safe now. We got you."

Luo Binghe made a broken sound, turning to press his face into his shizun's chest. "P-Please," he choked. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry…"

"We got you," Liu Qingge told him, again. "We won't let go."

"You're safe," Shen Yuan promised. His eyes glistened with tears and guilt. He kissed the top of Luo Binghe's head, and wiped away his tears. "Qingge is right. We won't let go. We're here. You're safe, Binghe."

No matter what they said, Luo Binghe kept apologizing. He apologized until exhaustion won and dragged him back to sleep. Both Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan stayed as they were, holding him. Neither said anything about moving.

Liu Qingge knew he wouldn't be able to get back to sleep after hearing those screams, and he knew that Shen Yuan would be the same. He didn't say anything about the tear tracks that trailed down his shixiong's cheeks.

It wasn't too difficult to parse what the nightmare had been about. Luo Binghe had been screaming for mercy, begging for forgiveness. He must have been dreaming of the Immortal Alliance Conference.

Guilt hung around Shen Yuan's shoulders. He didn't say anything, but he seemed to have come to the same conclusion.

Liu Qingge didn't understand why Luo Binghe felt as if he had to keep apologizing to them both, even after he was fully conscious. Why had Luo Binghe been afraid of him, too?

Not that Liu Qingge would ever ask.

Instead, he would support Luo Binghe in whatever way he could. Even if that meant just reminding him that no matter what, they would never let him go.

When Liu Qingge opened his eyes next, he was disappointed to realize they were still in Shen Yuan's realm. He had a creak in his neck. Glancing up, he eyed Shen Yuan who stared hazily at him.

"Morning," Shen Yuan murmured.

While Liu Qingge had somehow managed to pass out again, it appeared that his shixiong had not. He slowly unraveled himself from Luo Binghe and without a word, he tugged the man up off the floor.

Everyone was just sleepy enough to be led to bed with little complaint. Liu Qingge tucked both of them in, watching as Shen Yuan breathed out a slow, pained breath as he stretched his limbs and curled into Luo Binghe's arms.

"...you're getting up?" Shen Yuan asked in a sleepy whisper.

"Mn," Liu Qingge nodded.

Hesitating, Shen Yuan worried his lower lip with his teeth.

Liu Qingge crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "What do you need?"

Guiltily, Shen Yuan looked away. "...medicine," he whispered.

Which meant he needed food, too. With a nod, Liu Qingge took his hand and squeezed it gently. Then he brought it to his lips and kissed his knuckles.

It wasn't until he was reheating some leftovers that he realized how boldly he had acted, and he pressed a hand over his face and mumbled, "*Shameless…"*

The morning was strange. Liu Qingge fed Shen Yuan his medicine and some food, and spent the rest of it on his own, haunting the apartment. He did a light workout, stretches, and stood to watch the sun rise over the city.

Both Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan still slept.

He went out and walked to the park again, then jogged around the lake. More than a few people stared at him, but it was in a way that he was used to. (He had often thought of getting a veil for himself.)

When he made it back to the apartment, the morning was now beginning to mature into the afternoon. The apartment was still asleep. He showered. When he came out, he heard the soft

murmurs of a conversation in the bedroom. He turned to the kitchen and began to take out ingredients for lunch.

The corner of his lip quirked as he waited. He took a pot out of the cupboard, letting it clang as it hit the stovetop.

Almost immediately, the bedroom door was thrown open. “Shishu!” Luo Binghe cried. “Shishu! Let this Binghe!”

Schooling his expression, Liu Qingge turned with a raised eyebrow. “Mn?”

All of his teasing thoughts vanished immediately – because Luo Binghe was naked. He dashed into the kitchen and took the pot away from him with very little fight because Liu Qingge was completely distracted.

“This Binghe will cook breakfast!”

“Lunch,” Liu Qingge corrected, absentmindedly.

“*Lunch?”* Luo Binghe asked, appalled. His eyes snapped to the windows. He immediately took over the kitchen in a flurry. He ran back and forth, brushing past without a single care about his state of dress.

Heat stained Liu Qingge’s cheeks. He couldn’t tear his eyes away. Finally, as oil sizzled in the pan, he managed to choke out, “B-Binghe?”

From the bedroom, he heard Shen Yuan’s sleepy laughter.

“What is it, Shishu?” Luo Binghe looked over his shoulder, demurely. He was tantalizingly sleep-mussed.

Liu Qingge realized he was doing it on purpose. Of *course* he was. Angrily, Liu Qingge grabbed him by the arm and yanked him towards the bedroom. “*Shameless!”* He shouted. “Get dressed!”

The laughter from the bedroom grew stronger.

“But Shishu! This Binghe can’t leave…! The food will burn-”

As if he had placed anything in the pan yet! Reaching over, Liu Qingge turned the heat off. Then he shoved Luo Binghe from behind, forcing him back into the bedroom.

That’s when he froze.

Shyly, laid out in bed on his side, Shen Yuan lay naked with a book open in front of him. He tried to appear casual and nonplussed as he turned a page. The image was ruined by the blush that stained his cheeks. He glanced up underneath his lashes, as if surprised. “Oh, hello Qingge.”

Like an absolute menace, Luo Binghe stood grinning beside him.

“You… two…” Liu Qingge choked.

“This Binghe will get dressed…” Luo Binghe said slyly as he stepped towards the closet.

With an annoyed growl, Liu Qingge grabbed him by the back of his neck and threw him onto the bed. He decided not to say anything when Luo Binghe laughed delightedly and told Shen Yuan, “See, Shizun? I told you it would work!”

Shen Yuan was too embarrassed to answer.

The day passed once more. They stayed home and spent time together. They had sex, ate lunch, played boardgames, watched shows on the TV, and talked. Before dinner, Shen Yuan showed them a “gaming console.” There, Liu Qingge learned about the concept of “video games.” It took a while for him to understand how to manipulate his character on screen, and even Luo Binghe struggled.

They went from battle games to racing games and eventually, they just watched Shen Yuan play something he called an “RPG.” He explained the story to them, and Luo Binghe got jealous when Shen Yuan kept going on about a particular male character with awe in his voice.

That almost led to another round of sex.

In between the laughter and smiles, whenever Luo Binghe thought he wasn’t being watched, his expression darkened and grew grave. More than once, Liu Qingge caught him either staring out the window and watching the time pass or watching Shen Yuan in anguish. Every time he realized Liu Qingge was watching him, he quickly wiped his face clean with a bright smile.

They… still weren’t returning to PIDW.

(Why weren’t they going back?)

That night Luo Binghe had another nightmare.

He tried to catch himself, though he had already woken the other two up.

In a rare show of his clingy nature, Shen Yuan grasped for Luo Binghe and pulled him up between Liu Qingge and himself. There he held onto him and murmured into his ear that he was safe and that he was wanted and that he would never let anything like that happen to him ever again.

Again, Luo Binghe fell asleep apologizing.

(...he was hiding something.)

The next morning after breakfast, Liu Qingge remembered that he wanted to have a talk with his loves. He waited until both settled onto the couch. He stood in front of the TV, arms crossed, staring sternly down at the both of them.

“Qingge?” Shen Yuan asked, tucking his blanket around himself.

(Every day, he grew weaker and slower. More exhausted.)

Luo Binghe wore a plastic expression, perfect except for the anxiety that churned in his eyes.

“That man with Xiang Fei,” Liu Qingge said, glowering at them, “was a demon.”

Eyes widening, Shen Yuan looked away. He stared guiltily down at the tops of his hands.

Luo Binghe was slightly less surprised. He nodded.

Heavy silence settled around the room. Annoyance pricked Liu Qingge. Neither of the other two said anything.

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge continued, “Shang Qinghua’s working for him.”

Luo Binghe’s expression flickered, as if he didn’t think that the statement was *entirely* correct. He shifted on his seat and said, “...it’s more collaborative, at this point.”

Beside him, Shen Yuan flashed him an intrigued glance.

Deadpanning, Liu Qingge cleared his throat.

Wincing, Shen Yuan pleaded, “Qingge…” He was sullen and apologetic. “It is Xiang Fei who should tell you.”

Liu Qingge frowned.

He waited.

Neither said anything else.

Frustration welled up in Liu Qingge’s throat. It might be up to Xiang Fei to explain himself, but the point was that *both* Luo Binghe and Shen Yuan kept hiding things from him. How could they be equals if Liu Qingge was always half a step behind? How could they love each other if they didn’t *trust* him?

“No more,” Liu Qingge said. “Enough lying. No more secrets.”

“...I’ll do my best,” Shen Yuan promised.

That wasn’t enough. Frustrated, Liu Qingge pinched the bridge of his nose. “What is the point of hiding, when I will find out eventually?”

Shen Yuan sighed, eyebrows pressed together. “Qingge, there are some things that aren’t mine to share-”

“You knew the cure to Without-A-Cure since you were poisoned!” Liu Qingge argued.

Flinching, Shen Yuan shook his head. “What was I supposed to say, Qingge? That I just needed to dual cultivate *with a heavenly demon?* First, he was far too young! Second, I couldn’t just announce that Luo Binghe was a heavenly demon to the entire sect! I was protecting him!”

That was it: “*protecting him.”* Liu Qingge stared Shen Yuan in the eye and calmly asked, “Why does he need to be protected from *me?”*

Shen Yuan’s eyes widened.

Maybe at the time, it was true. He wasn’t sure how he would have reacted. But now? The three had lain together. They loved each other. They were courting. He deserved the chance to be angry. He deserved the chance to learn the truth and be able to react to that truth without his beloved expecting the worst from him.

Though, he also understood that he had to *show* them that he could be trusted. Exhaling through his nose, he stared down at his feet. This would be too hard to say with them staring at him. He began to pace.

Both waited as he stewed, trying to piece the words together.

When he finally had it, he stopped with his back to them. He crossed his arms and stared out the window. “I won’t lose.” It… wasn’t quite what he meant to say. He meant to say, *I won’t lose you.* “I…” His face grew red and he stared down at his feet, flustered and angry with himself. Why was this so hard!?

Shen Yuan took a breath to say something.

Then he stopped.

When Liu Qingge glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Luo Binghe had placed a hand on him and was shaking his head. It was a wordless request to give Liu Qingge more time.

Turning away from them, Liu Qingge squeezed his eyes shut. “Mingyan and I fight. She’s emotional. I don’t get it. I’m…” He was stupid, brash, and terrible with words. He was blind to social cues, and completely out of his depth about anything to do with *feelings.* He could appear thoughtless and uncaring, simply because he didn’t *understand.* “I’m trying,” he said. “It’s… not enough, sometimes. We fight. Even then, even if she makes choices I don’t understand or approve of, she knows that I…” *I love her.* “That I won’t…”

Angrily, he turned to them, “I won’t give up! I won’t let go! Even when you’re idiots! No matter what, it’s too late now! It’s your fault! So take responsibility!”

Shocked, Shen Yuan watched him with his eyebrows raised. His skin slowly pinked with a blush. A shy smile hooked the corner of Shen Yuan’s lips and he stared at Liu Qingge with eyes full of adoration. “Mn.”

“...we love you too, A-Bo,” Luo Binghe added with a light smile. There was something in his eyes. Something like guilt.

Embarrassed, Liu Qingge crossed his arms and turned his cheek with an annoyed huff.

“Shidi,” Shen Yuan said, warmly. “Come here.” He beckoned him with a hand.

Unable to resist, Liu Qingge crossed the room to him. There, Shen Yuan caught his hands and squeezed them. He grew flustered, eyes dropping, and he said, “From now on, I will try to tell Qingge everything. No more secrets.”

“No more secrets,” Luo Binghe added. He said so distantly, staring at their entwined hands. He pressed his lips into a thin line. After a moment, he stood. He pushed the low table aside and knelt down. His hands shook as he placed them atop his thighs. “Shizun. Shishu. There is something that this… Binghe needs to say.”

Liu Qingge exchanged a small glance with Shen Yuan. This was it; whatever had been bothering Luo Binghe. He suspected that it was something to do with Shen Yuan, and that’s why he kept having nightmares about the Immortal Alliance Conference.

He had no way of knowing that the truth would hurt him much more than that.

Eyes closed, Luo Binghe looked pale and frightened. He steeled his resolve, even as his expression grew bleak. “Shishu. Shizun. A-Bo… A-Yuan…” Tears filled Luo Binghe’s eyes and he lowered his head. “It’s my fault.”

Liu Qingge watched the half-demon prostrate himself on the ground. He didn’t understand. Not quite yet.

“You know why, then,” Shen Yuan said, voice soft.

Confused, Liu Qingge glanced between the two of them. “What?”

Shen Yuan let out a long, troubled breath. He squeezed Liu Qingge’s hands. “Binghe knows why we haven’t gone back.”

Back… Back to their realm? Their home?

The world started to slide out from underneath Liu Qingge’s feet. Only Shen Yuan’s hold on his hands kept him steady.

With a miserable sound, Luo Binghe choked, “I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

...am I sorry? No, not really Should I be sorry? Maybe.... Idk....

Hehehehehehehe.....

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

7.5k, about 30 min to read.

haaaaa;;; sorry that this chapter is so late. the ao3 curse is REALLY throwing out some punches.

warning for this chapter: it gets heavy. there's some humor and comfort mixed in, but please take care of yourself. if you need to wait, things sort of start really looking up pretty soon.

if you're not good with tumultuous situations, it might be best to wait out until the fic finishes. there will be a lot of ups and downs!

(it won't all be heavy! I promise! there will be a lot of comfort mixed in between.)

CW: The Luo Binghe Special (it's been a while!), grief, loss, self-harm (in the way of someone overexerting themselves and forgetting meals), death, a corpse in a dream, and generally some not so great coping methods.

Please take care of yourself!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Guilt was like a parasite inside of Luo Binghe. It nestled underneath his lungs, atop his stomach, and rooted into his organs. It played with his tendons like a zither. Every breath, its sharp thorns dug into his lungs. It had been a quiet thing that grew every passing second that they stayed in this world rather than returning to the other.

(Luo Binghe never knew he would hate being right.)

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry.”

His fingers curled into tight fists, which shook. Fear tangled with misery. He stood at the edge of the Abyss again, with a naked blade pointed towards his chest. That moment had been haunting him, and replaying in his dreams over and over again. It warped and changed until it was two blades pointed at him; blades whose masters wore the cold and unforgiving expressions of strangers.

It had been his fear from the start: telling them the truth. He worried that they would cast him aside and want nothing to do with him.

But…

I won't give up! I won't let go!

The war god had struggled immensely to thread the words together. Once he had, it resonated with Luo Binghe. No matter what happened, they had already chosen each other. They had chosen each other's mistakes, their weaknesses, and their faults.

None of them were blind to Shizun's health.

No one was surprised that Liu Qingge could be emotionally ignorant.

And his shishu and shizun *knew* Luo Binghe. They knew he was selfish and greedy. They knew he was voracious and needy.

Still, they had *chosen* him.

They loved him.

They could forgive him.

He just had to trust them.

Luo Binghe tried to take in a breath. His eyes burned and he hated himself for crying. He swallowed, forcefully pulling himself together. "It's my fault," he said. He was unable to look at either of them. Even if he trusted them, he hated the fact that he had hurt them. His choices killed his shizun.

How could either of them forgive him, if he couldn't forgive himself?

"It was me. I am the one who brought Shizun back here to begin with. It was me who dragged Shishu into this mess. I… brought us back after the meeting with the sects. It was always me."

At first, he hadn't realized. He had just wanted to save his shizun from whatever was killing him. He had poured every last ounce of his own qi into the man, desperately seeking any other power to help him. When he had found it, he woke up in another world.

The next had also been an accident. He had been tormented by Xin Mo and a qi deviation; he had sought any escape from the eviscerating pain. *That* one had brought Liu Qingge along with them.

It wasn't until Luo Binghe had the chance to study the System and its power closely that he began to understand. While the System had utilized him as a power source, that connection had also allowed him to manipulate its energy in turn.

Normally the System had concealed that loophole by erasing all evidence of its existence. Luo Binghe would have been none the wiser, if not for breaking the System to begin with. He didn't understand why it hadn't just sucked him dry, especially if he was the power source for it. He suspected that it had something to do with the fact that he was considered the "protagonist" of the world. That fact made him feel sick. Because instead of using him to heal itself, it leached from both Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan.

It was feeding on their life force every single time they moved between worlds.

That was why Shen Yuan's condition had been exacerbated. Luo Binghe's meddling possibly shortened his life even more.

Stiltedly, he explained all of this. He found a way to detach himself from the situation; not too dissimilar to when he read aloud difficult parts in PIDW.

No one interrupted him.

If that had been the *only* thing he had done – maybe it wouldn't have been so bad.

It wasn't.

It was worse.

"Every time we came back," he continued, forcing the truth through his teeth. "Mu-shishu was there."

It was never the System on its own bringing them back; it was Mu Qingfang.

The doctor had studied their "strange affliction" and figured out how to bring them back; he utilized a soul-summoning spell combined with qi transference. He just hadn't figured out how to stop them from going away in the first place.

From the doctor's own notes (and traipsing around in his dream realm), Luo Binghe was able to come to a few theories on his own.

The System was an entity that needed a massive amount of power to function. Somehow, Luo Binghe's attack had disrupted that powerflow, crippling it.

It was similar to a landslide crashing into a river. The rocks disrupted the water's flow, completely cutting it off from feeding into a nearby lake. Sometimes the water might be able to glide back onto track, but overall its initial path was now disrupted and blocked.

The more Luo Binghe manipulated the System's powers and forced that river to flow in a new direction, the further it got away from its initial path and the more water it needed to reach that lake.

There was more Luo Binghe had theorized… like how their souls were destined, allowing them to be intertwined as they were when springing back and forth.

None of that, of course, he had any real proof for other than a romanticized yearning to belong to both his shizun and shishu.

(Luo Binghe had an additional theory that he didn't even want to brush on; one that both his shishu and himself did not truly exist in this realm. It was only the System and Shen Yuan tying them here. Without Shen Yuan, he wondered if the both of them would simply just… fade away.)

Shen Yuan hummed in thought. At some point, Liu Qingge had sunk onto the arm of the couch, next to Shizun. His face was an expressionless mask. Both of their hands were still latched onto another, holding tight. His shizun tucked his knees up to his chest and reached out with his free hand to soothingly rub up and down the war god's back. "That is why you think we have yet to return – because we are no longer in the custody of the Cang Qiong Sect."

If they had been in the safety of Cang Qiong Mountain, Mu Qingfang would have conducted treatment to have them return.

Throat closing, Luo Binghe nodded.

"So, there's… nothing we can do," Shen Yuan continued, more slowly. "Not until Cang Qiong Sect is able to locate us." He hummed again. "Well, technically they just need to locate me. Previously, Luo Binghe wasn't nearby when Mu-shidi brought us back for the first time. Though," he continued with a wince, remembering that day, "that might be a reason for him to hold off. He would want to prevent any permanent damage that the System might cause."

For the first time since Luo Binghe apologized, the war god spoke up. "There's more." Eyebrows drawing together, he threw an accusing look at Luo Binghe.

With a watery breath, Luo Binghe nodded. It hurt to breathe. *I'm sorry.* He had seen that figure in the woods and knew that it hadn't been anyone from the Cang Qiong Sect. "This Binghe suspected… this lowly one had *planned*… we would never return."

At the time, he had thought he played all the right cards. Either the three would be separated or taken away from Cang Qiong Mountain entirely. He would rupture the System enough to cause extreme damage, and Mu Qingfang would never be able to reunite them and return them safely.

Liu Qingge lurched up onto his feet. He stared at Luo Binghe, eyes wide and incredulous. He opened his mouth. Then shut it. His expression darkened. All at once, his control snapped. He shouted and kicked the low table. It skidded across the floor and slammed into the TV stand. Electronic equipment shuttered, and figurines fell over. Wood cracked.

"Q-Qingge," Shen Yuan startled, reaching for him.

"You!" Storming forward, Liu Qingge grabbed Luo Binghe by his collar and wrenched him off the ground. "Yuan is *dying!"*

I didn't know, Luo Binghe almost protested. He didn't. Because Liu Qingge was right. He had forced their hands, moved them across worlds, because *he* thought it was for the best.

It wasn't his right to make that decision for either of them.

With uncertainty, Shen Yuan reached out towards them. "Qingge, don't-"

The worst part of it all wasn't the shouting. Luo Binghe *wanted* his shishu to shout. He wanted him to scream and hit him. Anger was okay. Both of them *knew* anger.

It was what was underneath that anger that terrified him.

There was something building underneath all that rage — something raw and dangerous.

Betrayal.

Even as Liu Qingge yelled, shaking him by his collar, pieces of him started to crack. His steel eyes grew misty. He slammed Luo Binghe against a wall and roared, "*My sister!"*

Oh.

Oh.

Breath hitching, Liu Qingge dropped Luo Binghe. He stumbled back a few steps, all the color draining from his face.

Liu Mingyan.

How had… Luo Binghe forgotten… about *Liu Mingyan?*

A strange, mournful sound dragged from Liu Qingge's lips. It had ripped straight from his soul, cleaving into the disturbed silence. He shook his head, fingers clawing into his hair as he stumbled back and stared wild-eyed at the ground.

Shen Yuan managed to rise onto his feet, eyes shining with worry. "Qingge. Oh, Qingge…"

Throwing out a hand, Liu Qingge distanced himself from the both of them. That hand was his only shield; the last thing that was holding him together. He paced around the back of the couch, trying to master his breathing. He had never looked so lost before, uncertain and caught off-guard.

Luo Binghe had done this to him. He didn't know why he hadn't realized before – the extent of what he had done. He knew he hurt both of them. He just hadn't realized…

He hadn't *known.*

All of the strength in his body sapped away. He let himself sink down, wilting into a kowtow. Because of him, Liu Qingge would never see his sister again. Because of him, Shen Yuan was going to die.

Because of his own greed, his presumptuous and misplaced confidence, he destroyed everything.

Beast.

Selfish.

He had destroyed the most precious things to him: his shizun and shishu.

With a quiet gasp, Shen Yuan tore across the room. Luo Binghe glanced up in time to see the impossible: the mighty and invincible War God of Bai Zhan fell.

It was as if all the life had fled from his body. His sharp, steel eyes dulled.

He crashed down onto his knees.

Shen Yuan threw himself down beside Liu Qingge, catching him in his arms.

The War God of Bai Zhan was supposed to be unbeatable. He was supposed to be unbreakable. He was supposed to face adversity with steely determination. He was supposed to never give up.

But how did a warrior fight *this?*

What could he do to defeat *all* of this?

Nothing.

He could do *nothing.*

Now Shen Yuan would die. And his sister – his *meimei* – would live the rest of her immortal life without a brother.

He never had the chance to say goodbye.

A weak, shuttering breath escaped the fallen war god. His expression was torn and saddened. His voice came out as a broken plea. “Mingyan.”

“I know,” Shen Yuan whispered. He knew intimately what it felt like to leave family behind. “I *know.”* He wrapped Liu Qingge up as tightly as he could, rocking them back and forth. “Anything you need,” he told him. “If… it’s to break things, anything can be replaced. It’s fine-“

All the fire in Liu Qingge snuffed out. Silent tears shined in his eyes. There was no fight left in him; no ambition or determination. There was nothing. Instead, he was vacant and voiceless. His head turned and burrowed into Shen Yuan’s chest.

The war god broke.

Jaw clenching, Luo Binghe dropped his head back down to the ground.

He did not rise for a long time.

Luo Binghe sat against the doorframe to the balcony, letting the cool night air wash over him. He breathed slowly, ignoring the twisting mass of pain in his chest. He stared at towering buildings and glittering lights in place of the faded stars. The door to the bedroom creaked open and Shen Yuan padded out. He had forgotten his cane somewhere, so he progressed through the room by trailing a hand across the furniture.

He wordlessly sank onto the ground next to Luo Binghe, pressing their thighs together, as he looked out at the vast ocean of metal beyond them.

Hands twitching in his lap, Luo Binghe lowered his gaze. He wanted to wrap his shizun up and drag him into his arms. He wanted to selfishly cling onto him for safety and comfort, even knowing that he didn't deserve it.

(…was that true?)

With a soft breath, Shen Yuan surprised Luo Binghe. He defied his thin face and leaned against his arm, resting his cheek against his bicep. After another moment of hesitation, he laid a cool hand over Luo Binghe's own and curled their fingers together. He squeezed.

Tears clogged Luo Binghe's throat. The rims of his eyes burned and the tip of his nose prickled. His resolve broke and he turned into his shizun, draping himself over him. He tucked one arm around him and dragged him in closer. He squeezed his eyes shut. Burying his nose into the soft tussle of his shizun's hair, he breathed in.

Everything smelled differently in this world, yet somehow his shizun was always his shizun. He was *home.*

"Oh, Binghe…" Shen Yuan murmured softly. He turned, free hand reaching up to cup his cheek. The tips of his ears were bright red, yet he didn't huff and squirm away from the physical affection. He leaned into it.

"Shizun is too lenient," Luo Binghe whispered, miserably.

"Mn?"

"Shizun should punish this Binghe," he continued. Each word became thicker as tears began to sprout in his eyes. He took in a shuddering breath, trying to keep some composure. "This Binghe was wrong."

"Mm…" Shen Yuan shifted. His knees tucked up, both his legs leaning heavily against Luo Binghe's thigh, as he let himself be vacuumed into Luo Binghe's desperate hold. His hand fell away from his cheek to rub circles on his back. "Why should I, when my unruly disciple has seemed to punish himself in my stead?"

A noise escaped Luo Binghe that sounded pathetic. It was meant to be some form of words.

Soft tuts left Shen Yuan. Soon, their positions had changed yet again. Now his shizun was in his lap, arms around his shoulders, running his fingers through Luo Binghe's hair. Their

heads now rested together, with Shizun murmuring into his ear nonsense words that were a balm to his pains.

He deserved to be punished.

(He didn't.)

He deserved to be hated.

(That wasn't true.)

He deserved to be-

(Loved.)

"Just give him time," Shen Yuan told him, cleaning his face with his sleeve. "That's all. Let him mourn, Binghe."

He loves you.

Liu Qingge had never said it explicitly, but he had in so many other ways. In his actions. In the way he danced around it. He had said it so many times. Luo Binghe had to believe in that – believe and trust in Liu Qingge who swore that he would never let go.

With a heavy breath, Luo Binghe leaned back and pulled his shizun tightly into his arms. He took a few moments to ground himself, to accept his mistakes. He wouldn't repeat them.

Luo Binghe was never one to give up.

He would not give up now.

Hoping to return would not be the answer.

He would find a way home — somehow. Time was not on their side. Every day that passed, his shizun grew weaker and weaker. He would have to find a way home; he didn't have a choice.

Luo Binghe would not fail.

Instead of returning with Shen Yuan to bed, Luo Binghe stayed out in the living room and meditated. He was determined to build himself a golden core in this world, no matter what it took. That was the first step.

He moved through exercises that he perfected as a teen, only to feel nothing.

It was frustrating.

It felt like he was a fumbling idiot who had no idea how to cultivate and was never meant for it. Like an outcast on a peak of peerless individuals and he was nothing but a stain, destined only for failure.

Still, he never gave up then. And he would not give up now.

The entire night dragged on. Just as the sun was beginning to dance towards the horizon, Liu Qingge stumbled out of the bedroom. He did not greet Luo Binghe, and didn't even seem to notice him. Head down, frown tugging his lips, he grabbed his phone and left the apartment without a word.

Luo Binghe continued to work on cultivating.

Around eleven, Shen Yuan dragged himself out of the room and immediately dropped onto the couch. He murmured a sleepy morning to Luo Binghe, not at all bothered by the fact that he wore only a thin shirt and tight little shorts.

Any other time the sight might have been inspiring. But… at the moment, it only stirred warmth and fondness in Luo Binghe's chest. Breaking away from his exercises, he put together breakfast.

Liu Qingge did not return home.

The rest of the day was spent at his shizun's side. They lounged on the couch, and Luo Binghe fell asleep at some point. He was spoiled by his shizun, who allowed himself to be held and nestled atop Luo Binghe's chest.

Lunch came and went. They sat at a table with an empty seat, again. The meal was far too quiet. After they ate, dishes were cleaned. With not much else to do, they returned to the couch.

There, Shen Yuan held Luo Binghe and played with his hair. They talked. About everything. About nothing. Luo Binghe studied his shizun, soaking in every single thing about him. The way he spoke, the curl of his smiles, and the way his eyebrows pinched together in mock anger. Luo Binghe studied him like he might not ever see him again.

Luo Binghe loved every version of his shizun. He loved the peerless immortal, the shizun, the older brother, the peer, the critic, the lover, and the mortal. He loved him when he was angry, and when he was sad. He loved his embarrassment, his thin face, and his strange quirks. He loved his kindness. He loved his passion. He loved everything.

A soft pink hue collected on Shen Yuan's cheeks. He stopped whatever rant he had been on — (he had been going on about a ridiculous video game, one featuring a key that was also a blade, and the nonsensical nature of its plot) — and asked, "What is Binghe thinking?"

Smiling, Luo Binghe reached up to trace his shizun's jaw. (Because it was something he was allowed. Because his shizun loved him.) "How much I love you."

With a strangled sound, Shen Yuan pulled back. He turned his head, embarrassed, and pressed his lips into a thin line.

Luo Binghe grinned. “Shizun. Shizun. I think I would love you in any universe. I would love you as a Heartless. I would love you if you were a Sith. I would love you… no matter what.” He gushed, even as Shen Yuan squirmed and started to try and cover his mouth. He laughed through his fingers and said, “I would even love A-Yuan if he were a worm.”

A soft, disbelieving laugh tumbled from Shen Yuan. He was flustered, shaking his head, and stopped trying to cover Luo Binghe’s mouth. He pinched his cheeks instead. “What is this? All this nonsense?”

“My love for Shizun is *not* nonsense,” Luo Binghe pouted, making his expression pathetic.

“Binghe…” Shen Yuan tutted. “You pay too much attention to this old man.”

“This Binghe does not pay attention enough,” he insisted, and graciously decided to ignore the fact that he was almost certain his current physical body was older than his shizun’s.

Luo Binghe managed to get three kisses before his shizun got too flustered. Then he allowed the conversation to resume, prompting his shizun to continue about a kingdom made of hearts and nonsensical plotlines.

The day moved on. Dinner came and went. Another container of an uneaten meal was placed into the fridge. Luo Binghe stared at it for far too long, stomach twisting uncomfortably. His heart was heavy. His eyes stung.

He had to believe in his shishu. He had to trust him. He just needed to give him time. He-

Shen Yuan called him from the couch.

As Luo Binghe closed the fridge door, the front door unlocked. Liu Qingge stepped in, breathing heavily through his nose. Sweat drenched his clothes. His limbs shook. He walked into the apartment, locked the front door, and went straight into the bathroom.

Moments later, the shower turned on.

Shen Yuan pushed up onto his feet, hands fluttering anxiously. He glanced over at Luo Binghe.

Wordlessly, they worked in tandem.

Luo Binghe reheated the food and plated it, while Shen Yuan grabbed a new set of clothes. By the time the shower turned off, Shen Yuan waited outside the bathroom door and a fresh plate of food waited for Liu Qingge on the table.

The door creaked open a minute after that.

Liu Qingge stood, towel draped around his middle, hair dripping and loose around his shoulders. He locked eyes onto Shen Yuan and the clothes. His expression was flat and

unreadable.

“Remember Qingge,” Shen Yuan said softly. “Anything you need.”

After another moment of silence, Liu Qingge moved. He wordlessly decided what he needed, and took it. He picked Shen Yuan off the ground, holding him to his chest, and walked into the bedroom. They disappeared through the door. The only noise was a surprised grunt from Shen Yuan, but no other sounds of protest.

Luo Binghe dithered. He plucked the plate from the table and cautiously trailed over to the bedroom.

Within, Liu Qingge lay sprawled out with his head buried in Shizun’s chest. He still lay in only a towel, the clothes retrieved for him were discarded on the ground.

Quietly, Shen Yuan ran his fingers through his wet hair. He spotted Luo Binghe at the entryway and nodded for him to set the plate on the nightstand.

After that was done, Luo Binghe moved and grabbed some extra towels and a brush. He handed both to Shen Yuan who gratefully took them and began a slow process of drying Liu Qingge’s hair. He was talking about going to the zoo again, describing the wide variety of animals they might see there.

Liu Qingge didn’t respond to any of it. He was dead weight atop his shixiong, not even moving when Shen Yuan toweled his hair.

Heart heavy, Luo Binghe left the two. He let the door close, and he went back to meditation.

When he sat down, working through the exercises, he tried not to think about the fact that he felt as if he hadn’t made any progress.

Hours spent the previous night working on his cultivation and there was *nothing.* Not a single spark of qi. Not even a hint of his spiritual veins.

He was going to lose them. His shizun was going to die. His shishu would never forgive him. He was going to-

He wasn’t going to give up.

He wouldn’t give up.

He would *never* give up.

A human body was much different than a demon’s. Especially a human body without cultivation. Luo Binghe was exhausted. He hadn’t slept the night before and was pushing

through another night. There was a strange pulsing sensation around the edges of his vision, his brain foggy and hazy. He rose from his meditation, afraid that he would fall asleep, and moved into base sword forms.

He tried to breathe energy through his body, hoping to awaken *something* or *anything.*

(There was nothing.)

It was only the second night.

Do not give up. Do not give up. Do not-

Time slid by like ooze trailing down a hill. The night had reached a point where it felt as if everything outside of this room had frozen and Luo Binghe was the only person left alive. It was not a good feeling. Not after spending so long in the Abyss. He used to savor early mornings for this reason – to find solace in the quiet bamboo grove to practice his cultivation.

Now it just seemed like a punishment.

One moment, he was taking in a deep breath and pushing imaginary qi through his imaginary meridians.

Then he was collapsing to his knees, head bowed and exhausted.

In the other world, two nights without sleep was nothing. He went through the entire Abyss only managing to catch a few bare hours of rest if he were lucky. This should be *easy.* It should be child's play. Instead, he was weak. He was mortal. He was stuck in a world that he had forced all of them into. Because he thought it was *better.*

Bitter anger rose in his throat. He clenched his fists, digging his nails into the palms of his hands, and tried to regain a semblance of control.

A hand lightly chopped the back of his head.

Luo Binghe startled and snapped into a sitting position, shifting his weight back onto his heels.

Crouched in front of him, Liu Qingge watched him with a single raised eyebrow. He didn't say anything, and just tilted his head slightly to one side in a quiet question.

"S-Shishu…" Luo Binghe whispered. His frustrations extinguished underneath the sudden onslaught of tears. He tried to breathe calmly.

He was failing.

The war god now wore some sleepwear, looking haggard and disconnected. The rims of his eyes were red, either from poor sleep or from the tears. Or a mix of both. He was so heartbreakingly out of sorts, it hurt to see.

"Bed is empty," Liu Qingge said, quietly.

Luo Binghe blinked at him, startled. He knew what the man meant – that the space that Luo Binghe usually slept in was unoccupied. But… Luo Binghe hadn't thought he would be wanted or even *welcomed* into that space. Not after what he had done. He had been prepared for the inevitable eventuality of finding alternative accommodations so that his shishu wouldn't have to tolerate him.

The war god studied his expression and snorted derisively. He stood, yanking Luo Binghe onto his feet as he did.

Startled, Luo Binghe couldn't fight back. Lack of sleep turned his muscles to jelly. He didn't quite understand what was happening until they had passed the threshold of the bedroom and Liu Qingge started to push him down onto the bed.

"S-Shishu… this Binghe is dirty-"

Liu Qingge paused and frowned. He made a disgruntled sound and pushed more pointedly.

"N-No, Shishu, I need to shower," Luo Binghe protested, fighting back. He had spent the entire night working on his cultivation, and the night before. He was really overdue for a-

A heavy sigh left the war god. He considered Luo Binghe for a long, drawn out moment. Then he shook his head. Grabbing Luo Binghe by the collar of his shirt, he manhandled him into the middle of the bed and ignored all protests.

His shishu was weaker than normal, muscles shaking and straining, but he still outmatched Luo Binghe in strength simply because Luo Binghe was bewildered and caught off guard.

He was thrown unceremoniously down, where Liu Qingge flopped on top of him and pressed his face into his neck.

Like a magnet, Shen Yuan scooted closer and immediately latched onto Luo Binghe. He mumbled sleepily.

"...told you," Liu Qingge murmured. "...won't give up."

It was forgiveness, given freely and factually, leaving no room for doubt. Given in a way that only Liu Qingge could ever manage.

Luo Binghe choked on a breath. Tears filled his eyes. After a moment's hesitation, he latched an arm around his shishu's back and held him close.

With an approving hum, Liu Qingge reached out and caught Shen Yuan's hand. He pulled all three of them close together, clinging tightly for comfort. "Stop being stupid," Liu Qingge murmured.

Luo Binghe nodded, not trusting his voice. Tears escaped and fled from the corners of his eyes.

It did not take long, with a steady and heavy weight on top of him and his shizun at his side, for Luo Binghe to fall asleep. He did not feel like he deserved to lay in that bed. He thought

he was wasting time and should continue to try and fight to bring his shishu and shizun back home.

But he shut those thoughts down.

His shishu wanted him. His shishu needed him.

He wouldn't hurt either of them anymore by staying away.

The next morning Liu Qingge learned – *really* learned – what it meant to be mortal. As a cultivator he could push himself past his limits and heal his sore muscles through circulating his qi or using his qi to help power himself to new physical limitations.

As a mortal, he just had to pay the consequences.

The war god wasn't a man who complained about pain. He didn't so much as wince as he rolled over and freed Luo Binghe.

Shen Yuan, surprisingly, had woken up before both of them. He had spent a gracious amount of time reading on his phone before he woke Luo Binghe and subsequently Liu Qingge.

The war god pushed himself up off the bed, took a few determined steps to the door, and miraculously dropped to the ground.

Both Luo Binghe and his shizun sprung from the bed in a panic, only to find Liu Qingge frowning and affronted that his body betrayed him.

Once they realized that his shishu was (mostly) fine, Shen Yuan *went off*. He sharply raised his voice, angry and stern. That's when Luo Binghe learned that his shishu had spent the *entire day* yesterday working out.

Without food.

"*-pushing* yourself is one thing but *you can't even walk!*"

Luo Binghe pulled his shishu off the ground and guided him over to the couch.

The man's entire body trembled, muscles giving out at every other step. He kept scowling down as if it was his body that was in the wrong.

Shizun continued, "This is ridiculous! This is worse than the time you faced the Wailing Terror Drake! You're not a cultivator, Qingge!" He kept ranting, allowing no room for anyone to say anything. Not that Liu Qingge had anything to add. He sank onto the couch and allowed Shizun to fret around him, piling him with blankets and rushing off to find pain medication.

Things settled down. Liu Qingge was, unfortunately, couchbound. It was very obviously driving him crazy. He kept attempting to drag himself up and work through some stretches, only to melt to the ground moments later.

The fourth time this happened, Shen Yuan stomped over and stepped down onto the center of his back to eviscerate him with another lecture. His shishu lay immobile, cheek smashed against the carpet, watching Shizun with a quiet glimmer in his eye.

(Luo Binghe had a feeling that Liu Qingge might remember this moment later… when they were feeling a little more put together.)

They spent the day distracting their war god.

First order of business, after a hearty meal, was a massage. Luo Binghe worked through all of Liu Qingge's tender muscles, from his neck all the way down to his toes. The war god hardly made a sound or moved, but there were a few times he sighed out and stretched like a languid cat.

Then Shen Yuan tried to inspire the war god with some competition. "It's okay if Qingge loses."

A scowl dragged Liu Qingge's eyebrows together, and he yanked the extra controller out of Shen Yuan's hands. He was determined to win.

It took a few tries, but he did eventually.

After that, Luo Binghe asked to borrow Shen Yuan's phone. When he opened up the web browser, he was delighted to see that his shizun already had PIDW open. He seemed to be reading a much later chapter, where Luo Binghe was facing an invading force from a group of rebels.

With the corner of his mouth quirked, he scrolled down to the comments section.

To his surprise, he found a new comment from "Peerless Cucumber."

Glancing up, he studied his shizun and shishu. Shen Yuan sat with Liu Qingge laying in his lap, head resting against his stomach. The war god trailed a finger along Shen Yuan's face, mesmerized by him.

"'Upon revisiting this chapter,'" Luo Binghe started, corner of his lip twitching.

He instantly had both of his beloved's attention.

While Shen Yuan was confused, the war god caught on instantly. He dropped his hand to wrap both arms around Shen Yuan's waist.

"'It's come to my attention what a complete and utter loss the rest of this arc was.'"

Horror filled Shen Yuan's face. He paled. "Oh, my *God."*

“‘The set up in this sequence is spectacular — this is the first of the invasions that are powered by rifts opening from the Abyss-’”

A strangled, mortified cry sprung from Shen Yuan’s lips. He instantly tried to rip away from Shishu, to rise to his feet and stop the reciting of his most recent commentary. “*Luo Binghe!”*

Liu Qingge tightened his hold and refused to let go.

The use of his full name caused Luo Binghe to pause momentarily, though he saw the slight spark of mischief in his shishu’s eye and it was enough to encourage him. “‘-that eventually bled into the power struggle between Binghe and a realm that haunted him from his youth-‘“

“Stop! *Stop!* Holy shit, you’re not! No! Binghe! Stop this instant, or *else!”*

Luo Binghe did not, in fact, stop.

He continued reading aloud the commentary, at least until his shizun finally managed to weasel away from Liu Qingge. He threw himself at Luo Binghe so forcefully that it tipped the chair back and knocked the phone across the room.

Luo Binghe dissolved into laughter while his shizun elbowed him and angrily yelled at him. His “punishment” mainly included a terrifying, sharp tone and his cheeks being pinched. There was also an excessive use of the word “brat.”

There was no *real* reproach in his ranting.

While his shizun’s thin face was quite battered, he didn’t seem entirely against the two of them seeing that side of him.

It was a relief, really.

And honestly, also quite fun to wrestle with his shizun.

“Apologizing to Shizun,” Luo Binghe said with zero sincerity.

Face red with anger, Shen Yuan pulled at his cheeks while he sat on top of him. “What is this cheekiness, ah? Who raised you!? What made you think you could be so bold with this master!?”

Neither of them had noticed that Liu Qingge had slid from the couch. Not until the war god suddenly spoke up, “‘The beginning of the arc still remains to be one of my favorites, which is surprising considering that it takes place in the later parts of the novel, buried in poorly written papapa-‘“

Shen Yuan made a sound that Luo Binghe would never forget.

(It was a squeak.)

Then he tore across the room and it was the war god’s turn to be pummeled into the ground by a tiny but vicious mortal.

They ended their little wrestling match with Liu Qingge almost smiling and Shen Yuan promptly changing the password on his phone.

That evening, the three of them sat around the table and ate dinner. Shen Yuan shyly began to talk about PIDW. He had expounded more on the story arc from before. At first he started off slowly, then blossomed into a full blown eagerness as he described intriguing creatures called “Bladed Hellfire Night Hounds.”

Luo Binghe had run into them before, so he piped up with his experience.

He loved seeing how his shizun lit up with a large smile.

At a stall in the conversation — Shen Yuan wanted to reference something specific in PIDW and was scrolling through his phone — Liu Qingge spoke up. “What were you doing?”

It took a bit for Luo Binghe to realize that his shishu was directing that question to him. He finished his last bite of food and cast a curious glance towards his shishu.

“Last night.”

Understanding washed over Luo Binghe. He dropped his eyes down onto his plate and set his chopsticks aside. His shishu wanted to know what he had been doing right before he had been dragged to bed. Guilt still lived in his chest. He didn’t think it would ever really go away; and he wasn’t quite sure that he would ever really forgive himself.

It made it harder to explain.

Luo Binghe realized his silence had bought everyone’s attention. His shizun set aside his phone and waited expectantly. With a slow exhale, Luo Binghe quietly explained, “This one… was trying to cultivate.”

He didn’t have to explain why.

Understanding flashed in his shishu’s eyes.

Shen Yuan pressed his lips together.

“Mn,” Liu Qingge stared down at his plate. Then he said, “I will join.”

Eyes beginning to burn, Luo Binghe nodded. He didn’t touch his food again after that, having lost his appetite.

Eventually, the conversation picked back up. Shen Yuan had found what he wanted to reference, and pointed out the inconsistencies within the writing. The three finished their meal, cleaned up, and returned to the couch.

Then they went to bed, Luo Binghe had another nightmare, and just like that, another day passed.

And another.

And another…

There was no real routine to be had, other than Luo Binghe being punctual with their meals. Other than that, he and his shishu started to try cultivating together. Once his shishu recovered enough, they also started working out.

Shen Yuan spent the days with them, either reading or playing games or simply talking. Sometimes he was dragged into phone calls. Most of them were with his sister, others were with Xiang Fei.

On rare occasions, his brothers called.

Days began passing and life in the mortal realm started to feel *normal.*

Sometimes Shen Yuan went out on his own, to go meet with his sister or spend time with all of his siblings. A few times his sister would follow him back home and all four of them would pass the evening spending time with one another.

Soon a week had passed since Luo Binghe's confession. He was nowhere near closer to cultivating a golden core. Still, neither him nor his shishu suggested giving up.

Luo Binghe tried to pass each day focusing on the happy moments. He tried to remind himself of things that brought him joy, and tried to be kind to himself.

But he wasn't strong enough.

When his strength failed, he hid. One day, after a particularly vicious nightmare, he sneaked out of bed and padded out into the living room. He pressed a hand over his mouth to catch any broken sounds. Then he walked out onto the balcony and dropped to the ground. His arms wrapped around his knees and he curled into a tight ball.

Nothing was working. Every day that passed, his shizun grew weaker. The circles underneath his eyes grew deeper. He slept longer. His appetite was shrinking. It didn't seem to matter how stringent they were with his medication.

Time was running out.

Liu Qingge grew… *used* to his grief. The man was never much for words to begin with, but nowadays he might go an entire day without speaking. The closest he got to smiling was a twitch on his lips if they were lucky.

It felt as if everything was unraveling, and no matter how many times Luo Binghe found a loose string, there were a dozen more catching and falling apart.

Every passing hour, Luo Binghe was getting closer and closer to the reality of failure.

He hated feeling so useless. He had vowed that he would *never* feel this useless again.

He had no one to blame but himself.

A body dropped down beside him. Arms caught him and pulled him to a tight, lung-squeezing hold. Liu Qingge set his cheek against Luo Binghe's shoulder. Quietly he said, "Enough."

Luo Binghe choked on a breath, hiding his face in his hands. Useless apologies spilled from him. He meant every single one of them, but words wouldn't fix what he had done.

Words wouldn't bring them back.

The war god squeezed him tight. He let Luo Binghe babble and sob. He did not let go. Eventually, he started to rock both of them. Nights in the city were never really *quiet.* There was something always going on. Sirens in the distance. Airplanes flying overhead. Cars crawling along the road.

This high up, a sharp wind only slightly muffled Luo Binghe's broken misery.

"Binghe… doesn't have to do everything on his own," Liu Qingge told him. It was the most words he had strung together in a while.

Luo Binghe tried to respond, but couldn't. His last nightmare had twisted the fate of his mother to Shen Yuan's. He had been just a child, racing and trying to get congee for his shizun. After fighting through beasts and monsters and twisted versions of himself, he was too late. He had burst in through the front door of the bamboo house, only to find Liu Qingge holding a small, pale corpse.

You're too late.

"Sect Leader Yue… will figure it out," Liu Qingge promised.

The strangeness of the statement was enough to knock Luo Binghe's spiral off course. He took in a breath, wiping away his tears, and glanced quizzically at Liu Qingge. "*Yue Qingyuan?"*

"Mn," Liu Qingge answered, resolutely. He had run out of words, so he didn't scorn Luo Binghe about any disrespect.

It brought Luo Binghe back to that conversation with Shen Yuan, where he had teased Liu Qingge about being in love with the sect leader. He almost brought it up now, feeling a slight sting of jealousy.

He wasn't sure what he was more jealous of: that the sect leader had gained so much respect from Liu Qingge that he had become some type of savior in his eyes, or that Liu Qingge had so many people he could devotedly depend on.

"They will figure it out," Liu Qingge added. He said it as if there was no other outcome – that the possibility of the Cang Qiong Sect *not* succeeding hadn't even occurred to him.

A week had already passed in this world. How much more time had passed in the other? Sure, Cang Qiong Sect might be losing two powerful peak lords, including the Bai Zhan War God, but he's not sure that even Cang Qiong Sect would go through the effort. First, Luo Binghe had been exposed as a heavenly demon. Second, his shizun did his damned best to turn the entire cultivation world against him.

Still, he didn't voice all of his doubts. He just asked, "What if they don't?"

At first, Liu Qingge didn't answer. He stared out at the horizon, watching an airplane fly overhead. His hand soothingly slid up and down Luo Binghe's side. He slowly let out a long, careful breath and turned to face him. "Then we will have each other. Till the end. And that will be enough."

Luo Binghe's throat closed. He was too selfish for that to be *enough.* But… there was some relief hearing that answer. He sank forward into his shishu's hold, tucking himself underneath his chin, and listened to the steady, resolute beat of his shishu's heart.

The answer, perhaps, wasn't trying to cultivate to a golden core.

It was, instead, trying to make his shizun as happy and comfortable as they could. To take every single day and experience every second of it. To cherish every moment until the end.

If Luo Binghe could not save them, at the very least he could do that.

He could love them and be loved in turn.

When they had nothing, they at least would have each other.

And he would never let them go.

Chapter End Notes

Shen Yuan essentially just accepts his role as portable teddy bear in this chapter. Does he like it? ~~Yes~~ No. The jury's out on this one-

Every short person ever just LOVES getting picked up. Absolutely. You should *definitely* try it-

(Do not endanger yourself in this way!!! This is a joke!!!! Treat all short individuals with great caution. They WILL bite)

Luo Binghe, of course, copes *so well* when it comes to the deaths of his loved ones. :)

Get ready for some more time skips!

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

6.9k which is about 28 min reading time..?

hey all! please take the time to drink some water and do some stretches. care for yourself as well!! I wanted to give a warning: Shen Yuan is not a reliable narrator and he does have a very stilted and unhealthy way of looking at life.

He has some negative thoughts towards wheelchairs, but specifically about himself using one.

He's a person with a disability that tries so hard not to have that disability, which isn't how anyone with a disability should treat their disabilities!

Use tools to make your life easier!!! Admit it if you need a break!! Take breaks and rest and be nice to yourself! It is NOT shameful to need something to help you function!!!!

DO NOT think like Shen Yuan!! He's a certified idiot! (but that's why we love him.)

CW: There is a bit of sexual content in this chapter, none of it explicit, a morbid outlook on life, thoughts of dying, dealing with one's death, grief, a generic hospital trip, and a cliff hanger.

Also, spoiler: some non-consensual kissing at the very end. (Medical purposes.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shen Yuan had always been dying. There was always some sort of clock over his head – be that the countdown of his beloved disciple returning from the Abyss or just the inevitable decline of his body. There had never really been a moment in his life where he could look ahead and see *forever.* So, this wasn't a big deal. It was fine! He would just deal with it.

That didn't mean he had to *like* it, per se. He tried his best not to be grumpy or irritable. But… It was hard putting on a face all the time and pretending that he was fine when he wasn't. There was a reason he had holed himself up alone in an apartment to begin with; when he wanted to be a piece of garbage and rot in bed, he could do so without any judgement.

But now he was sharing the space with two men that were the equivalent of hyperactive dogs.

...he was just being grumpy.

Today was a bad day. Even with blankets piled atop him, he felt sweaty and cold. He curled into a small ball, listening to the sounds of Luo Binghe in the kitchen. There was a knot of dread in the center of his chest. They would come in to drag him out of bed soon, and he didn't want to get up. His first instinct was to try and find a way he could hide for a day. He wanted to rent a hotel room and just rot. He wanted to be the miserable, grumpy little piece of shit he was without worrying that he might hurt any glass hearts or upset any overprotective war gods.

Everything hurt. There was never really a rhyme or a reason for any of it. Constant little sparks of pain, a dull thrum in his bones, and sometimes a little pinch of nausea just for a treat. His head was foggy and heavy. He just wanted to not exist for a day. That was all.

Recently his days had been filled with so many social events. Seeing his siblings. Taking Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge out to see the world. Inviting Xiang Fei over. Today they were going to go to the zoo.

Shen Yuan could go to the zoo.

He just needed…

He just needed to stop being selfish.

The bed creaked as someone sat on it, and Shen Yuan felt his heart sink. He did not want to leave his cocoon. Sitting at the dining table sounded like first class torture. His blankets shifted, and he tried to bite back the urge to curl into a tighter ball.

Instead of someone shaking his shoulder or stealing away the blankets, a body slid in behind him and wrapped him up in a solid hold. Shen Yuan relaxed. He really wasn't one for cuddling — really! He never had been before; not that he ever really had the chance. Most of the opportunities he had was in his youth, when his parents would crawl into his hospital bed or after his sister was born. It had been nice back then. And it was nice now.

Shen Yuan hadn't realized he dozed again.

Body heat was actually really, *really* nice. It was something that Shen Yuan hadn't really realized. At least, not until recently. Grief had unlocked something in Liu Qingge. He no longer had any qualms about grabbing Shen Yuan and using him as a portable teddy bear. What surprised Shen Yuan was that he didn't mind. He also had the sinking suspicion that even if he were the height of Shen Qingqiu, it wouldn't stop his shidi.

(Well, not so much of a suspicion. He had seen Liu Qingge hauling around Luo Binghe, much to his disciple's utter delight.)

A hand glided underneath his shirt and he woke to fingers trailing across his skin. He was surprised at how forward Liu Qingge was — not that he minded. Lips pressed against the back of his neck. Warmth blossomed in his chest. He forgot about his earlier grumpiness, languishing in comfort and warmth. It was a gentle way to wake him up; no shaking and no

insistent murmurs. The hand trailed up his side and settled over his heart. He made a small sound to say he was awake, and promptly went back to sleep.

He woke again to a hand trailing up his inner thigh. *That* was a little bold for his Qingge-

Ah. Wait. Another body had joined them. Luo Binghe was leaning over him, kissing Liu Qingge, and being quite shameless with his hands.

Shen Yuan grumbled.

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge whispered in warning.

“Breakfast is getting cold,” Luo Binghe answered, voice drenched with a pout.

As if rubbing the inside of Shen Yuan’s thigh would help with that!! He grumbled again. That time, he *had* meant to use actual words. He had a difficult time getting his eyes to open, much less his mouth.

“Shizun,” Luo Binghe murmured against his eyebrow. “Shizun. You should eat.”

Eat without me, Shen Yuan wanted to whine. He wanted them both to shut up. He didn’t want to move. He wanted to rot.

“It’s the afternoon,” Luo Binghe tried again.

Shen Yuan’s heart jolted. He had gotten a little lazier, sure! Sleeping in a bit later day to day. What was he supposed to do? There were no peak duties to worry about! No strict schedule!

He finally forced his eyes open. Luo Binghe had slipped underneath the covers and lay propped up over him. His lips were red from kissing Liu Qingge, and a small smile curled at the corner of them. That didn’t hide the worry that dampened his expression. Shen Yuan swallowed. There was a pang in his chest. “Okay.” Or at least that’s what he meant to say. All that came out was mumble.

Liu Qingge, who still had a hand over Shen Yuan’s heart, rubbed his thumb across his skin. “Binghe. Bring breakfast here.”

“No!” Shen Yuan protested. He moved, wrestling with the blankets to get out from between the two of them. “No. It’s okay. I’ll get up. I’ll get up-“

“Why?” Liu Qingge raised an eyebrow at him.

“…Binghe took the time to make such a grand meal for us.” And if he ate in bed, his picky disciple will claim that there are crumbs and that the sheets needed to be washed immediately, which seemed like too much work for something so silly.

“A-Yuan can have it in bed.”

“No. It’s fine. I’m up.” Shen Yuan wiggled and pushed two meaty chests away from him until he escaped the confines of his cocoon. He regretted it immediately, slumping as soon as he

reached the edge of the bed. Someone came up behind him to hook an arm around his waist and bury their face into his shoulder.

Over a week ago, Shen Yuan would have known who it was immediately. Only Luo Binghe was usually this touchy. Nowadays, it really was a coin toss. He glanced down and recognized the forearm. “Binghe…”

“Shizun can eat in bed,” he said quietly.

“No, no. Today is the zoo! Food and zoo.” Shen Yuan caught his wrist and peeled his arm off of him. He was slightly irritated. First, he didn’t need the two of them fussing over him. If he said he was getting out of bed, then he was getting out of bed. Not only *that,* but he was now vaguely turned on.

It’s not his fault!! There were two *gorgeous* men in his bed! Men that could bend *anyone.* And they had been touching him a *lot!*

Looking at you*, Stallion Protagonist!! What the hell?! Touching a man’s thigh so teasingly with no real intent!!*

Besides, sometimes a good orgasm helped with the pain. Whenever he could get the flag to rise, it was always worth it for the blissed-out full body relief that washed over him. Even if it was temporary. Not that he could do anything like that *now.* Forget any privacy for *that* sort of thing with two men who had long since thrown away the need for knocking. And it wasn’t like Shen Yuan could covertly kick them out of the room!

Both were too sticky!!! Far too sticky!!

Now that Shen Yuan thought about it, it had been a while since Luo Binghe initiated anything. It really had mostly been him that got the three of them doing… stuff. Maybe that was also attributing to his “pent up energy.”

…not that Shen Yuan was wanting *that*… or anything! It was fine! He’s gone without *that* for years. Sure, it was really nice being held close. He had never imagined that he would enjoy being filled in such a way. He had never really felt so *complete* before. Sex was… sort of nice.

(It was actually more than nice. It was great. Once Shen Yuan’s thin face got past the whole fact that he was *having sex*, it was fantastic!)

Either way — he had gotten almost through two lifetimes without sex. He could rub a quick one out in the shower if he needed to. Which he didn’t *need* to. For now, his main goal was the table and a pair of pants. Possibly. Maybe not. That sounded like a lot of work.

He ended up at the table without pants and feeling extremely irritable. He kept readjusting in his seat, pulling one leg up and then the other, while he poked at his food.

Luo Binghe was doing a valiant job at trying to keep the conversation alive. He told Shen Yuan how he and Liu Qingge had raced today at the park. It wasn’t until two pairs of eyes

landed on him that he realized he had missed something.

There had been a lull in the conversation and he hadn't noticed.

Sitting up, Shen Yuan glanced between both of them. The bright, mischievous smile on Luo Binghe's lips was fading. His heart sank. He hated that look. He *hated* it. He understood it – understood that they were the ones who were losing him.

But he was in pain and tired and he hadn't even *wanted* breakfast; why did they look at him as if he were already *dead?* He wasn't. He was right here! He just…

Without a word, Liu Qingge left the table.

Head lowering, Shen Yuan focused on his breathing to hold back a scowl. He knew it was unfair of him. He knew he was just cranky. "Binghe won…?" He guessed, raising his head to smile at his disciple.

Lips pressed together, Luo Binghe nodded.

"Binghe works hard," Shen Yuan said, straining to keep that same smile. "Beating the Bai Zhan War God! That's quite a feat. I bet Qingge wasn't too happy, as competitive as he is-"

A blanket crashed down in his lap, and he startled. He threw a wide-eyed glance behind him, only to have Liu Qingge step in front of the chair and tuck the blanket all around him. Then he set his hands on the arms of the chair, boxing Shen Yuan in. Heat rose to Shen Yuan's cheeks and he leaned back, staring bewilderedly at his shidi.

"Tell us," Liu Qingge demanded, "how we can help."

Shen Yuan dropped his gaze. He wasn't sure what to say.

They stood at an impasse, with the war god's stare increasing in intensity with every passing second. Sighing through his nose, Liu Qingge shook his head. He leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. His eyes fell shut. "A-Yuan."

Heart skipping in his chest, Shen Yuan clenched his hands in his lap.

"Accommodating for your needs is no trouble. Please. Just tell us."

Right. Shen Yuan felt his eyes begin to sting. Both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe had said that they wanted his burden. But that was before they all knew that they would no longer be returning.

(In hindsight… Luo Binghe's extreme reaction to learning that he had a terminal illness made sense now. At the time he had just assumed his disciple was a little sticky…)

"Qingge and Binghe already do so much," Shen Yuan said lightly. He reached up and placed a hand on Liu Qingge's chest. Though he did not push him away.

Liu Qingge frowned. He huffed, annoyed, and caught Shen Yuan's hand in his own. He squeezed.

"Shishu is right," Luo Binghe said, quietly. "Please, Shizun…"

He *had* promised them, hadn't he? "Alright! Okay," Shen Yuan blurted, flustered. "Enough fussing! What is this?" He now pushed away Liu Qingge, wrapping the blanket more securely around his shoulders. He tried not to make it look like he was hiding.

It was one thing to promise to change one's habits and behaviors, and another thing to actually do it! Didn't they realize how embarrassing this was!?

As his shidi drew back, he shared a look with Luo Binghe. Neither said anything aloud. They returned to their meal. It was awkward and too quiet, yet Shen Yuan had no motivation to fill in the spaces in between.

Once the meal was finished, Shen Yuan ambled over to his armchair and sank into it. He snuggled down into the plush comfort and pulled out his phone.

In the kitchen, Liu Qingge dogged Luo Binghe's heel, playfully annoying him. Water and suds became a hazard in the kitchen, with Luo Binghe whipping a wet towel near the war god to ward him off.

It was fun seeing the two like this at least; annoying each other and feeling safe enough to do so. Shen Yuan propped his face against his hand, feeling… out of sorts. His throat tightened.

…was he *jealous!?*

No. That couldn't be it!

…was it?

He gently rolled the feeling around, testing it. He wanted to be well enough to join them – to shoulder his shishu into Luo Binghe's reach. He could envision it. His shidi would get revenge by throwing him over his shoulder and Shen Yuan would balk at the injustice. Luo Binghe's laugh would ricochet across the apartment while Shen Yuan huffed and kicked.

They would rough house, with Liu Qingge stumbling and falling down onto the ground because of something Luo Binghe did. Somehow he would manage to fall with grace, ensuring that Shen Yuan didn't get hurt on impact.

Then maybe…

They would wrestle. Shen Yuan would lose because he wasn't used to rough housing anymore. The last time he had was when he was younger with his er-ge. But…

Liu Qingge would pin him to the floor. He would look down at Shen Yuan with dark, assessing eyes. Then he would lean down and-

Nope!

Shen Yuan's throat tightened. He shrank down in his chair, knees tucking up underneath his chin, as he threw a glance towards the kitchen. There, his shidi and disciple were now cleaning up after their sudsy mess. His eyes fell back to his phone. He was glad that the two of them would have each other after he-

The thought hit him with a sharp sense of injustice and longing. His hand tightened on his phone. Vision growing misty, he took in calming breaths through his nose. There was no use getting upset. No use wallowing in despair. He had always been dying.

It was fine.

The other two finished up in the kitchen. Shen Yuan said, "I can get a car to pick us up whenever you two want to leave. The zoo closes around sunset. If we leave now, you two will have a few hours to check everything out. Depending how long we're there, we can maybe try a restaurant. I know Binghe likes to cook, but there's some places I want you guys to try."

"Let's stay home." Liu Qingge stepped over the back side of the couch and flopped down on the seat closest to Shen Yuan. He stretched out, feet hitting the coffee table. They had been within this realm for a little more than a week, yet Liu Qingge had almost completely adapted. He wore sweatpants and a loose sweatshirt pushed up to his elbows. He looked boyish and relaxed, his long hair pulled into a braid with stray hairs leaking out. It really was unfair, him wearing sweats.

He was… *really* attractive.

Shen Yuan pulled his eyes away from Liu Qingge's thighs and tried focusing on his phone again. "It's a weekday, so the zoo won't be too busy."

"Shizun," Luo Binghe said, sinking onto the couch on the other side. "Why don't we just stay home?"

Lowering his phone, Shen Yuan stared up at the two of them. He narrowed his eyes. "I told you two to stop fussing."

Luo Binghe ducked his chin, face falling with guilt. He stared down at his hands. When he cooked earlier, he had thrown his hair up into a haphazard bun. A few stray curls fell on either side of his face. He had *fully* taken to this world – wearing short sleeves that showed off his well-defined arms. Had his biceps always been that thick?

Snapping his eyes shut, Shen Yuan pressed his fingers to his temples. *Be depressed, grumpy, or horny. Not all at the same time!!! Just choose, you stupid idiot!*

He had to *not* stare at Luo Binghe's arms *or* at his shidi's legs.

"...Shizun?"

"Zoo." Shen Yuan sat up. "We're going. Where's my cane?"

There were a few more words of protest that Shen Yuan cut off with a fierce glare. He wasn't going to just let them wait around while he deteriorated! He was tired of this stupid, depressing attitude! And being stuck in this apartment with these two was near torture at this point.

(Why the *fuck* was he so horny!?)

As soon as he was ready, Shen Yuan stood by the door. He leaned against the wall, eyes closed, hoping that his medication might kick in.

Luo Binghe drifted to stand beside him. He shifted on his feet, eyes downcast.

Honestly, even after all this time, Luo Binghe had the same tells when he thought that he had done something wrong. Except now he was feeling guilty about Shen Yuan's health. It wasn't his fault. There was no one to blame for it, as tempting as it was to get upset and throw a fit. Shen Yuan did *not* blame anyone; certainly not his Binghe.

"Binghe."

His disciple straightened in surprise, flashing him a startled glance.

"I…" Shen Yuan winced. "What's with the long face, ah?" He stepped closer and reached up to pinch his disciple's cheek. "Frowning like that will only ruin your complexion."

Luo Binghe smiled endearingly at him. "Shizun…" With the address, his small smile already started to fade like misty clouds smothering the light of the sun.

There was a certain look in his eyes that Shen Yuan recognized; it was one his siblings often gave him. It was like a ghost haunted all of them, clinging and dragging them down. Except that the ghost was very much alive at the moment, and he was *tired* of seeing that look.

I was always going to die, Shen Yuan wanted to say. Just as he was about to, he realized that it was not quite true.

In the other realm, *his* Binghe had never intended to kill him; he only ever wanted to be back by his shizun's side. Somehow, somewhere along the way, Shen Yuan had changed "Shen Qingqiu's" fate.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan said, quietly. His heart sank. He didn't have the right words to fix this. He wasn't quite sure what he could say. Luo Binghe was a tender heart who took his mistakes too seriously. How will he ever forgive himself for bringing them here?

Shen Yuan already had.

He was *always* going to die.

At least now he wasn't going to die alone.

Movement out of the corner of his eye ripped him out of his melancholy thoughts. He smiled and said, "Is Qingge finally ready?" He was about to say something about a beauty routine

and taking too long.

That's when his mind finally caught up with what he was seeing.

Liu Qingge stepped out of the bedroom with a low riding pair of pants, which fit snugly to his hips. A large expanse of pale skin flashed underneath a shortened piece of fabric. His shidi…

His shidi had put on the crop top again.

All the moisture in Shen Yuan's mouth fled. He was ashamed to admit that his jaw dropped. His eyes fell to the hem of the shortened shirt, tracing down Liu Qingge's stomach. There were moles there — ones that Shen Yuan was too thin-faced to trace with his lips but he *wanted* to.

Oh, how he *wanted* to.

Heat punched a hole into his stomach and he couldn't breathe or move. His skin tingled.

How was it possible to be *this* attractive?

Liu Qingge sneered at both of them and crossed his arms. "Well?"

"Sh-Sh-" Luo Binghe stammered, not in any better state than Shen Yuan.

There was the barest hint of a mischievous smirk on Liu Qingge's lips. He threw a glower at Shen Yuan. "You wanted to go. So?"

Ah. *Ah.* This…

This was embarrassing on a few different levels. There was no way Liu Qingge intended to walk out that door dressed like that, which meant…

Ugh!

First, how dare his shidi be so cunning?! Wasn't that Luo Binghe's forte!!? The two were spending *far* too much time together! Shen Yuan was doomed.

Second, had… Liu Qingge noticed… Shen Yuan's "pent up energy…?" Oh.

Oh no.

The thought might make Shen Yuan dissolve on the spot, mortified. His cheeks turned into hot coals.

"*Well?"* Liu Qingge demanded.

"Fuck you," Shen Yuan snapped back.

Beside him, Luo Binghe twitched. It seemed that no matter how long they were around each other, it was *very* difficult for his disciple to wrap his head around Shen Yuan *swearing.*

“You’re not planning to leave like that!” Shen Yuan said, hating the way his voice cracked.

Liu Qingge’s steel eyes grew sharper and more daring. The corner of his lip curled. “I’m not?” He hesitated for a moment, then stretched his arms over his head. It absolutely was choreographed.

That didn’t stop Shen Yuan’s eyes from following the hem of his cropped shirt up his ribs.

Now his mouth was *watering.*

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe whined.

“Mn?” Liu Qingge raised a single eyebrow, nonplussed if not for the way his face was reddening by the second.

“Fine,” Shen Yuan snarled. He threw aside his cane and tore off his jacket. “You *win.”*

“*Shizun?”* Luo Binghe balked.

“Shut up! Shut up.” Shen Yuan stomped over to Liu Qingge and grabbed the collar of his shirt. “*Shut up.”*

“I will,” Liu Qingge drawled, eyes sparking with heat. “As soon as you make me.”

Shen Yuan was just irritated enough to do just that. He yanked him down, and pressed a fierce kiss against his lips. A delighted hum rumbled from the war god. He gathered Shen Yuan into his arms, plucking him off the ground with annoying ease, and drew back into the bedroom.

He was too focused on the scalding warmth of Liu Qingge’s hands on his thighs and the way the war god teased his lower lip between his teeth to think about anything else.

Even as they hit the bed, Shen Yuan didn’t stop. Later, he might be horrified that he had ground desperately down against his shidi.

Right now, he didn’t care.

All he cared about was the fact that he *needed* to be touched, and the war god was *delivering.*

Liu Qingge broke their kiss, rolling his head to glance at something. One of his hands broke away from Shen Yuan’s ass and he made a brusque gesture of summons.

Catching his breath, Shen Yuan followed his gaze.

Off to the side, Luo Binghe watched them with yearning. He straightened as soon as both of their eyes were on him. He smiled, somewhat sheepishly.

Groaning in annoyance, Shen Yuan snapped, “Binghe. I swear, if you don’t come over here this *instant-”*

That's all he had to say.

Then the half-demon pounced.

The next hour was a challenge in endurance, but *deliciously* mind numbing.

The best part of all?

Shen Yuan hardly had to lift a finger.

As it turned out, Liu Qingge was deceptively observant. The worst part about it was that Shen Yuan was almost certain that both his shidi and his disciple were comparing notes. He caught them murmuring to each other at the table, and Luo Binghe said a little too loudly, "I never read it that way!"

The war god nodded and made a hand gesture, and paused once he realized Shen Yuan was watching.

Both turned to him with extremely innocent looking faces, one smiling with big, dark eyes and the other with eyebrows tilted upwards in a quiet questioning way.

Shen Yuan narrowed his eyes, frowning. "What's going on?"

With a nudge, Liu Qingge motioned for Luo Binghe to move.

Determined, Luo Binghe rose and made his way across the room. He leaned against the arm of the chair, drawing in close to Shen Yuan. "Shizun…" he started off, voice heavy with thought. He raised a hand to tuck some hair out of Shen Yuan's face. "This Binghe was wondering… did you want to go to a restaurant?"

Shen Yuan considered his question. He didn't realize that he had leaned into the touch and had tilted his head back in preparation as his needy disciple drew near. "We can. There's one with extremely greasy food – it's not really good, but… sort of something you have to try at least once."

"Alright," Luo Binghe said, his eyes twinkling with far too much happiness for giving up the ability to cook one of their meals. He leaned in further.

Tilting his head back, Shen Yuan magnetized to him.

When Luo Binghe kissed him, he was smiling. It didn't make for a good kiss, but it was nice that his disciple was smiling so much. Ever since everything came to light (was that two weeks ago now?) Luo Binghe had been more morose.

“Thanking Shizun,” Luo Binghe murmured, and he kissed him again, slowly. He sank into the chair, crawling atop Shen Yuan, and deepened their kiss. He hummed in delight, pulling back when he felt Shen Yuan squirm and push back against him. “Shizun. Shizun… this disciple is going to be very insatiable. Tell him when it’s too much.”

“*Not* disciple,” Shen Yuan grouched. His skin was on fire as Luo Binghe leaned in and kissed him again.

All in all, it was *extremely* nice having the weight of an entire body on top of him, so he didn’t complain. So what if they kissed for a while? If it was what Luo Binghe wanted, it was what Luo Binghe got!

(Never mind that Shen Yuan never thought to tell him once that it was too much.)

Soon a month had passed. There were good days, and there were bad. On one of the worst, Shen Yuan woke up to Liu Qingge desperately trying to wake him in the middle of the night. His eyes were widened with panic.

Shen Yuan had just enough strength to choke out, “Hospital.”

He didn’t remember most of that night. There were multiple points in which he simply blacked out. Some snippets rotated in his mind – being haphazardly dressed, carried out to a car, Luo Binghe sobbing and begging Shen Yuan not to go.

It… was for the best that he didn’t remember.

His hospital stay lasted a while.

On the first day, his father showed up. Shen Yuan had too many tubes and far too many drugs in him to really pay attention to the confrontation. He watched through hazy eyes as both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge faced off against his father. He didn’t remember anything that was said between the three, just heated words full of angry barbs.

Had… his father always been so small?

Throwing his hands in the air, his father bit off, “He’s your problem then!” and left.

The less Shen Yuan thought of the hospital trip, the better.

Once his condition had improved enough, he had woken up to his sister laying in bed with him. She had her head on his chest, humming as she read on her phone. He recognized the song as one he used to sing to her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and joined in humming.

“Aren’t… you supposed to go back?” Huiying asked. “To that book?”

Shen Yuan rubbed her shoulder, figuring out how he might answer that now. He didn't want to lie to her – not again. At the same time… wouldn't it be better if she thought that another world was waiting for him?

"It's taking a little longer than we thought," he answered.

His brothers visited him as well. It was always somewhat hilarious when his er-ge showed up, as anti-social as he was. He avoided both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe like the plague, already walking into the room like a bristling cat.

He always came off as harsh and vindictive, but Shen Yuan knew he was just shy.

Near the end of his visit, he spat at Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge, "Thanks. For taking care of our stupid brother." Then he left rather quickly after that.

Sometimes Shen Yuan's hospital room was full of far too many people. His siblings would make the room feel so small with their boisterous conversations. They would laugh at old memories, dragging Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe into their ragging. Othertimes, it was late at night and Shen Yuan somehow had two bodies squeezed into his bed.

"Family members only" his ass. When he wasn't looking, Luo Binghe must have gotten to the nurses. Ah, his heart went out to the poor hospital staff!! Who could resist the power of a stallion protagonist, especially one as stubborn and handsome as Luo Binghe!

Then the hospital trip was over. New prescriptions, larger doses, and a brand new wheel chair.

The last… Shen Yuan kept trying to convince himself that he wasn't embarrassed. It was fine for *other* people to need a wheelchair. But his legs worked perfectly fine! So what if he had a harder time being on his feet? So what if pushing himself through an entire day on his feet left him bedridden the next day? He didn't *need* it.

But… using it might mean he could go out more with Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe…

As Liu Qingge wheeled him out of the hospital, Luo Binghe rode in the chair with him and his sister laughed at their shenanigans. The hospital staff waved Shen Yuan goodbye and told him to stay out of trouble.

And… that was Shen Yuan's new life.

It *was* a new life. Because of Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge, Shen Yuan had never been so social. He was having movie nights and game nights left and right, and he went to places he never had the motivation or energy for before. Not that everything was fun and games.

Sometimes he needed to stay inside, and spent the day curled up in a blanket. Those days, despite his guilt about trapping both his-

His-

Both of his *loves*.

Despite him trapping Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe, two men who he loved, inside, those days ended up pretty alright.

Shen Yuan had promised once to lean on them. Sometimes he forgot that promise — sometimes he was closed off, irritable, and frankly an awful person to be around.

Sometimes they would fight.

The worst one was between Liu Qingge and himself. It turned into a shouting match and Shen Yuan couldn't remember how it started. He only recalled how it ended, with Liu Qingge storming out of the apartment.

He knew he was hurting, and he knew he wanted to hurt those around him because of it. When Luo Binghe tried to console him, he snarled at him and kicked him out of the bedroom.

Still, Luo Binghe persisted.

After a month of living together in this world, Luo Binghe had truly come to understand Shen Yuan. He broke through his walls in ways he never would have dared before the Immortal Conference. He stubbornly clung onto Shen Yuan and laid on top of him, even as Shen Yuan grouched and snapped at him.

And he politely ignored Shen Yuan's misty eyes.

Because in the end, even if Shen Yuan had always known he was going to die, that never meant he *wanted* to.

It never meant that he wanted to drag down those around him.

He hated being useless and weak. He hated it. He *hated* it.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe murmured into his chest. "We chose you. We love you. We'll keep choosing you, no matter what. Again and again and again."

Shen Yuan closed his eyes and swallowed down a surge of emotion. He gave up on his attempt to stubbornly ignore the lung-crushing weight on top of him and wrapped his arms around his Binghe instead.

When Liu Qingge came home that night, he sat next to Shen Yuan and looked him in the eye. "Sorry."

Exhaling, Shen Yuan nodded and dropped his gaze. He said, "I… am sorry, too. I forgive you." His cheeks turned warm and he grit his teeth. The next few words were more difficult, but they were the truth. "I… know it's not easy. And I know I don't make it any easier. You never asked for any of this-"

A hand gently took his chin and lifted it.

Shen Yuan met Liu Qingge's eyes.

The war god stared at him, steel eyes a storm of emotion. He quietly said, “A-Yuan. I told you. I won’t lose.”

For the second time that day, Shen Yuan was overcome with mortifying emotions. He barely managed to keep his face straight, even as his eyes prickled. Swallowing, he nodded.

He wasn’t quite sure who kissed who first, but they ended up on a pile on the couch, watching a movie while Luo Binghe finished up dinner in the kitchen.

Shen Yuan spent his days being cared for, *allowing* himself to be cared for, and relearned what it meant to *live.*

Life passed one day at a time. One month melded into two. The three of them had built a routine. Both his shidi and disciple would rise early in the morning and go off to do whatever it was the two wanted to do. Most of the time it was working out or working on their cultivation. Then they would come home, shower, and prepare breakfast.

If Liu Qingge was the one waking Shen Yuan, he would crawl into bed beside him and wake him up with gentle kisses down the side of his face and down his neck. If it were Luo Binghe, things would often get a little more… heated.

When Shen Yuan was feeling alright, it often led to a late breakfast. The protagonist *was* insatiable, but… Shen Yuan did not mind it.

He had read enough of the novel to know that Luo Binghe was built for!

Their days depended on Shen Yuan’s health. Sometimes they would host one of his siblings or Mobei-Jun and Xiang Fei. Other times, it would just be the three of them with Shen Yuan staying in bed. Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge had adapted seamlessly to the modern realm. While Liu Qingge still had a preference for long sleeves and long pants, he was more comfortable in modern clothing than he was at the beginning.

Sometimes it really hit Shen Yuan, seeing Liu Qingge stand at the doorway in joggers and a zip-up, how *weird* it was to see the War God of Bai Zhan glaring down at a *phone.*

At night, Luo Binghe still had nightmares. That much was to be expected when he no longer had control over his dreams. They had managed to get him to a doctor and prescribed some medication to help, as well as to an eye doctor to get him a pair of glasses.

Shen Yuan had *completely* underestimated the power of Luo Binghe wearing a pair of glasses. Both him *and* Liu Qingge couldn’t stop staring at him on their way home.

The moment they had arrived back at their apartment, Liu Qingge slammed Luo Binghe up against the wall and kissed him fiercely.

Luo Binghe for the next few days knew no peace (not that he wanted any) wearing those sleek, black frames. On more than one occasion, he often ended up wearing *only* his glasses.

The half-demon ended up with a big grin and a pep in his step for two weeks after that.

Overall, life was…

Life was *good.*

It might end up being shorter than Shen Yuan wanted, but he was happy. He was *happy.* (When was the last time he had been happy?) He made peace with everything. It was certainly more than he had ever been expecting.

Sure, it wasn't a cool cultivation setting with ridiculously named but really cool monsters. But he also still had friends, family, and two people that he loved at his side.

One day, Shen Yuan woke up feeling a bit… odd. The three of them had plans to go out and walk in the park – which Shen Yuan had to cancel. His skin felt weird, and his muscles were strung out in an uncomfortable way. He began to wonder if it was going to be another flare-up.

They spent the morning in. Luo Binghe made baked goods, and Liu Qingge laid on the couch with Shen Yuan. The two were scrolling through PIDW and Shen Yuan was highlighting his favorite moments.

Luo Binghe demanded he read them aloud.

At some point, Shen Yuan had handed his phone off to Liu Qingge so he could continue on where he left off. He fell asleep with his head on Liu Qingge's chest, listening to the baritone of his voice.

He wasn't surprised to wake up to someone kissing him.

What *did* surprise him was how much better he felt.

Actually…

Shen Yuan felt *very* good. He hadn't felt this awake in *ages.* Energy hummed through his body. His eyes fluttered open for a moment and he saw Luo Binghe's rich, brown hair. That didn't surprise him either. He reached up, capturing the back of his disciple's neck and tugging him in closer.

Humming in surprised satisfaction, Luo Binghe dragged his tongue across Shen Yuan's lower lip. His other hand slid up Shen Yuan's thigh.

Ah. So *that's* how it was? Not that Shen Yuan was complaining. His body was *very* ready for this! He felt like he could go running. Hell, he felt like he could *fly.* He had grown so used to brain fog and pain that it was startling to have so little of it. It almost felt like he was missing something.

He wondered what made his medication suddenly work so well.

Sure, there was some lingering stiffness in his limbs and even a headache crawling around his skull, but neither of those things were as bad as it had been.

Fuck.

Luo Binghe had gotten *really* good at kissing these past few months.

A soft sound escaped Shen Yuan as sharpened teeth caught his lower lip. He noticed something as he dragged Luo Binghe in closer. His… hair was straight. Why…?

His hand slid over broad shoulders, clothed in silk.

Clothed in silk.

Shen Yuan's eyes fluttered open, again, and he caught a red glow.

Disbelief hummed around him.

Sharp teeth. Silk. A red glow.

Energy.

Qi. *It was qi.* Shen Qingqiu was back! They were back!!

Holy *shit.*

Above him, Luo Binghe chuckled. It was… It was certainly a *strange* chuckle.

Shen Qingqiu wondered if the demonic side of Luo Binghe had changed the tone of his voice. A little excited to be back… perhaps? Claws dragged through Shen Qingqiu's hair. With a soft grunt, Shen Qingqiu pushed back against his disciple's chest. "Binghe." His voice crackled like dry, splintered wood. It had been a while since he had spoken.

Another deep laugh. Luo Binghe leaned in and kissed him again.

"*Binghe,"* Shen Qingqiu snapped, shoving him back with more force. His limbs still felt weak. What the hell was his disciple doing!? They were back!!! Certainly they had better things to do other than-

"You're certainly more fun to kiss when you're awake," "Luo Binghe" drawled.

Shen Qingqiu blinked. His stomach sank. He stared up at the demon in front of him. Red zuiyin. Red eyes. Sharp, cutting smirk. Straight hair.

It… was *not* Luo Binghe.

All of Shen Qingqiu's previous excitement shattered into mortified dismay. He gaped.

The stranger looked at him, appreciatively. “There *were* other methods of energy transference…” He drew his hand up Shen Qingqiu’s thigh, grasping his hip. “Though I do prefer my partners more… *cognitive* in bed. But now that you’re so *eager,* perhaps we could…?”

It was then that the *real* Luo Binghe attacked.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone is curious, because Shen Yuan IS an unreliable narrator, both LQG and LBH were comparing notes on SY and trying to figure out his true feelings.

They work together to figure out his tells when he is not feeling great and may need to stay in bed that day, and they also figure out his tells on when he might have some... "pent up energy."

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

7k which is roughly a 28 minute reading time.

I had to split this chapter up... so expect a final chapter count shift... soon.

Edit: oh wait!!! This chapter pushed us past the 200k mark. Holy smokes!!! So many words!!!!

CW: So much ~~testosterone~~ I mean posturing. Expect canon typical violence. Swearing. Possessive boyfriends. Medical issues..?

If you think of anything else that you think needs a warning, let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liu Qingge had never been one to take naps. His mind had a hard enough time shutting off as it was, so sleep had always been a disciplined routine for him. Though it was different when he had someone laying on top of him, head resting on his chest. He wondered what Shen Yuan thought, hearing how quickly Liu Qingge's heart ran. He had snippets of memory as his consciousness began to fade.

A figure stood over him, gently plucking the phone out of his hand before it crashed down atop Shen Yuan's head. Lips pressed a kiss to his temple, and then to his mouth. His mind drifted.

Then he dreamed.

Sometimes in his dreams he was back home with his cultivation. He would be on another nighthunt, following the tracks of one beast or another. So much of his life had been dedicated to training and fighting, it's where his dreams often followed. His current dream was a strange one – because he was in pain. His entire body was stiff and exhausted. He partially wondered if that was because he had fallen asleep with Shen Yuan on top of him.

Then he heard a hum.

Liu Qingge's eyes snapped open. Several things clicked for him at the same time. He acted at once. He circulated his qi through his body, breathing tightly through his nose. His heart pounded like a battering ram inside his chest. Every single one of his muscles were weakened from disuse. Aches smarted up every single corner of his body. Massive amounts of demonic qi suppressed the entire room, making it hard to breathe. Out of the corner of his eye, he

spotted a figure swathed in dark robes, leaning over Shen Qingqiu. His robe was open far too darlingly, exposing his chest.

…it wasn't Luo Binghe.

There was no scar on his chest. The body type was wrong. The hair was wrong. The face was also *very* wrong. Massive amounts of qi rolled off of the stranger, and it was fully demonic.

Anger curled through Liu Qingge and he threw himself into a sitting position. His hand flew out, and Cheng Luan sang as it arched through the air and snapped into the palm of his hand.

It had been ages since he had last held Cheng Luan, and now his body *sang.* He tried lurching off the bed but his body wouldn't respond. It was frustrating. He almost yelped in pain as his muscles twinged and twisted in protest.

The stranger on the bed was *kissing* Shen Qingqiu! Liu Qingge saw red.

(In the back of his mind, he recognized that his shixiong's thin face would probably take decades to recover from this… Mainly from the fact that he was *kissing* the stranger back. It was obvious that he wasn't in his right mind, murmuring "Binghe." Liu Qingge tried to shout at him to open his damned eyes, but… his voice wisped out of his throat like dust atop a scroll.)

"There *were* other methods of energy transference… Though I do prefer my partners more… *cognitive* in bed. But now that you're so *eager,* perhaps we could…?"

Luo Binghe seemingly came out of the shadows. He was a blur of pure rage and vengeance, tearing across the room and launching himself at the stranger. Two bodies wrenched away from Shen Qingqiu and slammed into the ground. Eyes glowing red, Luo Binghe snarled in the stranger's face. The zuiyin on his forehead pulsed.

Massive amounts of demonic qi flooded the room. Between that and Liu Qingge struggling to regain control of his body, he felt like he might pass out. It felt as if he was disconnected from himself. His limbs wouldn't respond as he tried to shift and move them. Cramps started spasming up his legs and torso, and knocked the breath clean from his lungs. It took all his strength to remain sitting.

He wanted to throw himself into battle, to work in tandem with Luo Binghe.

But the thought of moving seemed like a far off dream, seeing as he could hardly stay upright.

On another bed, Shen Qingqiu stared in wide-eyed disbelief at the two tumbling figures on the ground. Blood sprayed across rock. A sharp breath escaped Shen Qingqiu, his hands tightening on the blankets. He seemed to be having an easier time than Liu Qingge moving about, almost as if he just woke up from an extended night's rest.

Liu Qingge finally took stock of the rest of the room; it was more of a cavern with five beds. He did not recognize the area. Thick stone surrounded them on all sides. He belatedly

wondered if they were somewhere in the Ling Xi Caves. On the far side of the cavern, Shang Qinghua was having a slightly easier time than Liu Qingge rising to his feet.

Damn it.

The An Ding peak lord wore nothing but a thin medical robe, hair pooling down around his shoulders. His eyes were widened with terror as he watched the fight in the middle of the cavern. On the other side of him, the Mobei prince had risen into a crouch atop his bed, cringing and snarling. He was getting ready to help Luo Binghe in the fight.

Damn demons and their recovery speed.

Liu Qingge threw his legs aside and almost shouted from the sheer agony that twisted up his body. He collapsed forward, breathing heavily.

That's when he noticed that the six of them were not alone. There were Qian Cao disciples in the room – one stood at Liu Qingge's side, nervously taking his arm to assess his health and trying to get him to stop moving.

Through hazy pain, he spotted Yue Qingyuan *and* Mu Qingfang. The sect leader watched, hand tight around the hilt of his sword. Despite the calm detachment of his expression, his hand was white-knuckled.

Across the cavern, Mu Qingfang met Liu Qingge's gaze. He spotted Cheng Luan in his hand and gave the barest nod of approval before his eyes dragged back to the snarling mess at the center of the cavern.

One of the heavenly demons grabbed the other and slammed him repeatedly into the harsh stone. Bone cracked. Blood and matter splattered in an arc.

"What." Liu Qingge demanded, voice weak.

His eyes caught sight of *another* fucking demon. This one stood in the shadows, scales speckling up his neck and on his cheeks. His snake-like eyes watched the fight almost dispassionately, if not for the tension in his stance. The man looked coiled and ready to strike at any instant, as soon as the moment called for it.

The bodies wrestling on the ground parted with an explosion of power. Someone flew and slammed against the far wall, cracking stone. It was Luo Binghe. He slummed onto the ground, wheezing as his bones reknit. Blood dripped from his lips. He glared at the stranger, wrath billowing around him with his qi.

"Ah…" The stranger stood, wiping out his robes. They were in tatters, blood coating his front. With each passing second, the wounds closed. He reached up and popped his jaw back into place. A lazy, indulgent smile filled his lips. He looked as if he should be lounging across a throne with a drink in hand, not in the middle of a battle. "You have your mother's temper."

With Cheng Luan in hand, Liu Qingge tore from the bed. He settled into a fighting stance. His vision blanked out as pain ripped through him. He controlled his breathing to stop himself from passing out. The Qian Cao disciple cried out in surprise while someone muttered, “Of course the War God is already on his feet…”

As Liu Qingge regained his senses, he reassessed the situation: demon in the corner, the Mobei prince ready to fight, Shen Qingqiu was mobile, Shang Qinghua was semi-mobile, and both the sect leader and Mu Qingfang were ready to join the battle. But for some reason… they weren’t.

First if they were going to get out of this alive, he needed to get their best fighter back into shape. His voice cut across the heavy quiet of the cavern. “Binghe. Breathe.”

Fighting the other heavenly demon while enraged would not help him. Luo Binghe blinked, wiping sweat from his brow. He rose out of his feral crouch and sank into one of the fighting stances that Liu Qingge worked through with him.

“Call your blade,” Liu Qingge told him.

Luo Binghe hesitated. There were no swords sitting by any of their bedsides. By all appearances, they should be unarmed.

That was not the case.

There was a bladed fan near Shen Qingqiu, one that he quickly plucked up and flicked open to cover the lower half of his face. His sharp eyes cut across the room as he too began to assess the situation.

Liu Qingge noted that one of the Qian Cao disciples had an empty sheath. That meant that they had stepped into the area carrying Cheng Luan as if it were their own sword.

Which meant that Yue Qingyuan and Mu Qingfang had been prepared for the stranger’s presence and had also been prepared to trick him.

Was this meant to be an ambush?

Liu Qingge circulated qi through his body. Even though he was on his feet and did not waver, he knew if he tried to take a single step he would fall. His body hadn’t been active in months now. Even with the help of circulating qi, his muscles were fatigued and kept cramping. He would be useless in a fight. Just standing was already taking everything out of him. Mu Qingfang had to know that – which meant that this *wasn’t* about fighting.

It was posturing.

Fuck.

This entire fucking situation depended on *lying.* Liu Qingge was *terrible* at lying. But he was good at remaining stoic and calm. He would rely on the others to twist words. For now, he focused on the truth: “He favors his left side; prior injury still healing.”

The stranger's smile sharpened, eyes glinting dangerously as they narrowed at Liu Qingge.

"Spotted," Luo Binghe said. He set off, hand outstretched. Zheng Yang flew from another disciple and slapped into the palm of his hand. Spiritual qi harmonized with demonic pulses, coalescing around the half-demon.

The two met again in an explosion of energy. A few disciples cringed at the oppressive wave of qi. One even took a few staggering steps out of the cavern to fall to their knees and wretch.

"This master would appreciate it if these caves weren't torn asunder," Mu Qingfang said, dryly.

With a sharp laugh, the stranger held his hand out. A blade formed from shadows into the palm of his hand. With a single flick of his wrist, he cut towards Luo Binghe.

Eyes widening, Luo Binghe barely had time to dodge. He side-stepped just in time. A massive slice of energy cut right through the stone walls and floor, leaving a gauge deep enough that Liu Qingge could stick his arm into it. If Luo Binghe hadn't moved, it might have cut him clean in half.

Liu Qingge kept his breathing slow and his expression determined. But he was terrified. He couldn't do what he did best – and that was *fight.* He was useless; nothing better than a sword someone left hanging on the wall. He could barely stand on his feet. If this all came to blows-

Mu Qingfang sighed heavily.

"Ah… my hand slipped. Apologies, A-Fang," the stranger said, rising to stand at his full height. His eyes pulsed red.

Luo Binghe's attention narrowed on the sword. He took half a step back, grimly determined.

If Liu Qingge didn't know him so well, he wouldn't have noticed that Luo Binghe had paled. He glanced over at Shen Qingqiu, whose eyes had widened ever so slightly at the blade in the stranger's hands.

That's when Liu Qingge recognized it: Xin Mo.

A dark aura hummed around the blade, resonating demonic qi.

"Tianlang-Jun," Mu Qingfang answered in a sardonic tone, "if you would stop provoking my patients."

That name hit like the heavy strike of a gong. Liu Qingge almost swayed on his feet. *Tianlang-Jun.* The previous demonic emperor – the one that had previously been trapped underneath a mountain. What the *hell* was he doing here? Why the *hell* was he kissing Shen Qingqiu!?

The oppressive aura around Tianlang-Jun receded. He let Xin Mo drop from his hand, fading away into the shadows, and shook out his fingers as if he had been holding something hot. He

flashed Mu Qingfang a benign, innocent glance. “I underestimated how possessive my son would be.”

Luo Binghe snarled in response.

Ah. That… made sense, didn’t it? Tianlang-Jun was the last remaining heavenly demon that Liu Qingge knew of. He was known to have gotten involved with someone from Huan Hua Palace. Of course the results were Luo Binghe. He watched his beloved out of the corner of his eye, wondering how Luo Binghe was doing meeting his birth father.

Liu Qingge wanted to kill the man himself.

He also wanted to step over and press a hand on Luo Binghe’s back to help ground him. Though the fourth demon still lurked in the corner, suppressing his own aura. It was like a snake in the underbrush, waiting for the perfect moment to catch its prey unaware. Liu Qingge wouldn’t take his eyes off of him for a second.

With graceful ease, Shen Qingqiu rose from the bed. It was sort of difficult to see the man as anything but Shen Yuan with a mask on. Even with Shen Qingqiu’s cold indifference and the way he held his fan in front of his face, in Liu Qingge’s mind’s eye he saw the shorter man with a bedhead and sleepy eyes.

Shen Qingqiu threw pointed looks towards Shang Qinghua, who had taken a few shaky steps away from his bed. The An Ding peak lord was a little too preoccupied to notice the Qing Jing peak lord’s glance; he was muttering under his breath and dragging his fingers through his hair. Panic widened his eyes as he frantically looked around, as if trying to find some way to put out a raging fire.

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu said, mildly. His eyes were on Tianlang-Jun’s sword hand.

Understanding the unsaid question instantly, Luo Binghe shook his head minutely.

His connection to Xin Mo was severed completely.

Shen Qingqiu’s face did not even twitch, yet Liu Qingge spotted the way his fingers tightened on the fan.

It was apparently *very* bad news that Luo Binghe no longer had Xin Mo – and even worse news that his sire now had control of it. From what little Liu Qingghe had seen of the blade, and what he had heard reading through PIDW, it was *extremely* bad news. Dread sank his heart.

They were going to die here after everything, weren’t they?

No, Liu Qingge tightened his hold on Cheng Luan, feeling the sword hum between his palms, *I won’t lose.*

“Now,” Tianlang-Jun said, straightening the tatters of his lapels, “since we’re all present-”

“Su Xiyan did not betray you!” Shang Qinghua yelped. He apparently had figured out how to put out his metaphorical fire.

Tianlang-Jun’s expression did not change, but somehow Liu Qingge knew whatever Shang Qinghua just said was a mistake.

Standing on trembling legs, Shang Qinghua choked out, “She was betrayed by her own sect! The Old Palace Master captured her and held her within the Water Prison, and used her to draw you out!” He gulped. “She tried… she tried to go to you after she escaped, but it was too late.”

Liu Qingge had thought Tianlang-Jun’s aura overwhelming before.

Now it was downright *crushing.* In a flash, Tianlang-Jun was across the cavern. He had snatched a hand around Shang Qinghua’s throat and held him aloft. His eyes blared red, dark energy swarming around him in sparks and tendrils.

Disciples buckled and crumpled onto the ground.

Shen Qingqiu choked and spit out some blood.

It took everything Liu Qingge had not to collapse onto his knees. He took one wavering step backwards. One of the muscles in his calf started cramping. It felt as if someone had carved their fingers into the meat of his leg and started braiding his muscle into a tight knot. Sweat dotted across his forehead and he bit his own tongue to stop himself from panting from exertion.

The Bai Zhan War God could not be *exhausted* from *standing.*

Snarling, the Mobei prince lurched towards Shang Qinghua and Tianlang-Jun. Screaming, Shang Qinghua held out a hand and begged, “No! *No!* My king, please, *please!* It isn’t worth it!”

Eyes wide, the ice demon drew to a sharp stop. He stood, poised to strike.

“P-Please, my king, save yourself-” Shang Qinghua wheezed. “*Go.”*

“And leave in the middle of such a regaling performance?” Tianlang-Jun asked. Despite the power radiating off of him and the maddened gleam in his eye, he held a deceptively careless poise. He was every bit a royal, down to the terrifying certainty that nothing in this world could really hurt him.

“N-Not…” Shang Qinghua choked. “L-Lying!”

With calm steps, Mu Qingfang walked up behind them. Despite the power radiating around Tianlang-Jun, he hardly winced as he reached out a hand and placed it on the heavenly demon’s shoulder. “Tianlang-Jun,” he said, evenly. “Remember what we spoke about; that sword of yours?”

Tianlang-Jun hummed.

The ice demon twitched.

With a flick of the heavenly demon's hand, the Mobei prince went flying and smashed into the opposite wall. The entire cavern shook and pieces of debris began to litter from the roof.

Shang Qinghua cried out, reaching to cling onto Tianlang-Jun. "Stop! Stop! I'm not lying, I'm not-"

"You have fifteen seconds to impress me with your lies, or your life is forfeit," Tianlang-Jun said pleasantly.

Ice started to spread across the floor from the Mobei prince. He slowly started to rise to his feet again.

"This master would not recommend such a course of action," Shen Qingqiu drawled with faux calm.

Tianlang-Jun tilted his head to show that he was listening.

"The tiniest puncture is all it takes," Shen Qingqiu added.

After a long breath, Tianlang-Jun turned his head just enough to spare the doctor a glance. His eyebrows raised. "A-Fang. You know most poisons won't work on me."

It was then that Liu Qingge noticed Mu Qingfang's other hand. A sharp needle gleamed between his fingers, and it was pressed close to Tianlang-Jun's spine.

"It will be enough." Shen Qingqiu drew out towards the center of the room, fanning himself lightly.

Mu Qingfang explained calmly, as if he were reading numbers off a scroll, "The poison is one that attacks demonic qi. Your constitution will be enough to negate its effects, eventually."

"You will be incapacitated long enough for Qinghua-shidi's demon to have grabbed him and taken him to safety," Shen Qingqiu continued. "By the time you've regained consciousness, all disciples will have fled from the room, and Binghe will be prepared to reengage you in combat."

The aura around Tianlang-Jun began to shrink. His eyes sparked with amusement. "That is why we're here, isn't it?" He spoke directly to Mu Qingfang now, a flash of betrayal twisting his features. "You planned for all of this. You knew a fight would break out."

"A healer must always be prepared to face the worst outcome," Mu Qingfang answered, calmly. After a moment's hesitation he added, "We have no intention of capturing or harming you."

Disbelief twisted Tianglang-Jun's expression. It dripped away piece by piece until he was smiling benignly, eyes flat and expressionless. His gaze lifted to Shen Qingqiu. "Mm… my son will face me, but did you account for my nephew?"

“Sect Leader Yue should be suitable to face him.” Shen Qingqiu dipped his head towards the sect leader who stood calmly amidst the storm of demonic qi.

Instead of saying anything, Yue Qingyuan dipped his head politely to the heavenly demon. He let out some of his own aura. There was so much condensed qi in the air that the air started to shimmer as if spurned by the direct heat of the sun.

While the heavenly demon was preoccupied, disciples started to escape from the cavern. More than a few could not handle the amount of energy flooding the place.

“The Xuan Su Sword is a mighty opponent,” Shen Qingqiu continued, coldly. “He is the one who beat you during his discipleship. How strong do you think he is now?” Raising an eyebrow, the Qing Jing peak lord looked every ounce arrogant and untouchable.

Liu Qingge knew he was screaming on the inside.

“Your nephew would be too focused on survival, and would not see the poisoned needle flying his way,” the Qing Jing peak lord finished.

Calmly, Mu Qingfang showed his hand. He had multiple needles waiting to pierce their targets. He turned his head just enough to give the snake demon an apologetic nod.

The snake demon dipped his head in understanding.

“Mn…” Tianlang-Jun considered that turn of events. “My nephew would be down long enough for you to successfully apprehend him or kill him.”

Head bowed in shame despite the battle being theoretical, the snake demon said, “I am sorry, my lord.”

“It is to be expected, nephew,” Tianlang-Jun said, humored.

“As soon as your nephew is apprehended, you will be fighting alone.” Shen Qingqiu concluded. He spoke matter-of-factly, as if it wasn’t absurd that all of them were having an imaginary battle. “You will lose.”

Tianlang-Jun laughed cheerfully. “You did not account for one thing.”

“Which is?”

“My son cannot defeat me.” Tianlang-Jun flared his aura, eyes glowing brilliantly.

Shen Qingqiu’s eyes narrowed.

“Besides, your beloved war god is incapable of a fight,” the heavenly demon concluded. “That needle of A-Fang’s will not be swift enough to prevent me from crushing the An Ding peak lord’s windpipe. And we are in the middle of your sect. I survived one mountain coming down on top of me. What do you suppose is another?”

Gritting his teeth, Liu Qingge flared his own qi. He launched himself forward, landing right before the heavenly demon. His entire body strained, muscles shrieking. He swallowed it down and thrust the point of his blade towards Tianlang-Jun. "Try me!" He shouted.

He hoped his limbs weren't shaking as much as he felt they were. It was hard keeping his breath even. If the heavenly demon so wished, he could easily bat Liu Qingge aside. But the point of this wasn't to fight.

It was to out bluff a heavenly demon.

Something in Tianlang-Jun's eyes flickered as he stared down the blade. His indolent smile faded slightly.

"Tianlang-Jun," Mu Qingfang said. His voice softened into a soothing tone. He still had one hand on the heavenly demon's shoulder, and it was then that Liu Qingge realized that the healer had been exchanging energy with the man this entire time – possibly trying to negate the effects of that cursed sword.

"As you can see, Qingge has made an expedient recovery. The Bai Zhan War God is undefeated," Shen Qingqiu boasted, chin raised. "He is second to none except the Xuan Su Sword. Dare you try your hand at facing him?"

Hearing Shen Qingqiu praise him…

Well. Liu Qingge couldn't help it if he were standing a little taller, his resolve strengthened.

"The An Ding peak lord may not be impressive in his martial feats, but you are a fool to dismiss him so quickly," Shen Qingqiu ridiculed. "You think crushing his windpipe would do *anything* to him? This master would be surprised if such an attempt had any effect at all."

"And as for the mountain?" Tianlang-Jun asked, mildly amused.

"You say another mountain falling on you is of little importance," Shen Qingqiu said, thoughtfully. "This master knows you are bluffing. Your recovery from your previous incarceration has had its lasting effects on you. You're no longer at the same level as you were before, when you first went head to head with Sect Leader Yue. Besides…" With a twist of his fan, Shen Qingqiu let out a burst of qi. Wind swept up all around him, whipping around his robes and making his hair splay artfully around him. His eyes were sharp and dangerous, as cutting as the breeze that shot across the cavern and sliced a clean cut under Tianlang-Jun's eye. "We are in the Ling Xi Caves, a place *potent* with spiritual qi. We will not tire as quickly as you might hope."

Liu Qingge…

Ah.

He was really in love with that man, wasn't he?

"Last of all," Shen Qingqiu claimed, "you can not hope to defeat Luo Binghe."

“Oh?” Tianlang-Jun raised an eyebrow. “I have Xin Mo. What does he have?”

For the first time since they had woken, Yue Qingyuan spoke. He stepped up beside Luo Binghe, exuding serenity as he said, “His entire martial family.”

A shocked, shaky breath escaped Luo Binghe. He stared at the sect leader in disbelief.

Such a proclamation was one thing to say when facing a common enemy. Liu Qingge hated to admit it, but he wondered if the sect leader would echo such thoughts when faced against the other sects.

Laughter rumbled from Tianlang-Jun. He stared down Yue Qingyuan, as if looking for the lie. When he didn’t find one, his face twisted. All at once, his aura completely vanished. “So, you are right. I lose in this scenario.”

“Indeed,” Mu Qingfang said, still glowering fiercely like a parent scolding their unruly child. “So assuage any intention of harming *my* martial brother.” He stepped around and caught Tianlang-Jun’s wrist, the one that held the An Ding peak lord.

Shang Qinghua stared at Mu Qingfang wide-eyed. Tears had sprouted in the corners of his eyes.

Thoroughly amused, as if he had just pulled off a grand joke and hadn’t threatened everyone’s lives, Tianlang-Jun released his hold on the small peak lord.

With a choked gasp, Shang Qinghua dropped to the ground. He immediately backpedaled, skidding across the cavern floor. He managed to blindly throw himself into the arms of the Mobei prince, who snapped his teeth at Tianlang-Jun.

Sighing, Tianlang-Jun turned his attention to Mu Qingfang. With his free hand, he reached up and gently traced his knuckles along the doctor’s cheek “Well, well, well. I’d always known humans to be cunning. How is it that I keep underestimating you?”

Mu Qingfang’s expression fell into its normal placidity. He shoved the brazen hand aside and said, “As I said, a doctor prepares for the worst case scenario should a patient have a relapse. Much like you are close to experiencing. Now,” he forcefully took Tianlang-Jun’s wrists like an unruly child, “Close your mind off to Xin Mo so I may treat you.”

Tianlang-Jun hummed. The dark churning energy around him calmed, and the reddened madness faded from his eyes. “A-Fang, I think I may be in love with you.”

With a weary sigh, Mu Qingfang shook his head and focused on examining his health. “This master has been over this, Tianlang-Jun. That is just Xin Mo and your starvation for interpersonal connections.”

Smiling pleasantly, Tianlang-Jun looked at Mu Qingfang coyly from underneath his lashes. “Mm…. I suppose we will have to see after you treat me, A-Fang.”

That was it.

They did it.

It took everything in Liu Qingge's power not to collapse right then and there, though he knew he could not move.

Reading this, Luo Binghe darted across the cavern and possessively snapped, "Get away from that man, Shishu!" He grabbed onto Liu Qingge and hauled him away, hiding the fact that he was bracing most of Liu Qingge's weight as he dragged him.

Liu Qingge never wanted to kiss him more.

Not that he wasn't also embarrassed at being manhandled in such a manner. He snapped, "Brat!"

Ignoring his protests, Luo Binghe hauled him back to his bed and made him sit down.

"Ah… the Regret of Chunshan did not mention *this*. Is one person not enough for my son?" Tianlang-Jun asked, amused. "Must he claim two?"

Luo Binghe threw a dark look towards his sire.

"You need not worry," Tianlang-Jun said with a satisfied smile. "I had only kissed your precious shizun to bring you all back to this world. I've no intentions on him." His eyes slid to Shen Qingqiu with an eyebrow raised. "Unless, of course, Peak Lord Shen would like to continue-"

Lurching back onto his feet, Liu Qingge threw a glare towards the heavenly demon. "Die!"

"This lord will cut off your tongue," Luo Binghe snarled.

Tianlang-Jun merely laughed.

Embarrassment colored up Shen Qingqiu's neck and settled in his ears. His fan covered the lower half of his face, his eyes falling to the side. From this angle, his expression was visible to Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe. His mouth was twisted in mortified disdain. With a stiff turn of his head, Shen Qingqiu demanded, "Will anyone care to explain what is going on?"

Liu Qingge heard Shen Yuan's voice in his head, *What the fuck? What the* fuck!?! He almost smiled. Then his legs buckled. A hand casually caught his waist and tugged him back onto the bed. Luo Binghe was far too good of an actor. He verbally scorned Liu Qingge for getting out of bed, making it seem like it wasn't Liu Qingge's body failing that made him flop but an overbearing half-demon. It was partially embarrassing, but it also felt nice being close to him. It felt safer that way. Liu Qingge accepted the doting with the quietest sigh of relief as spiritual qi sank into his overexerted muscles.

On his other side, Shen Qingqiu drifted to them. His fan was still up, obscuring his face. After the… *incident* involving Tianlang-Jun earlier, his shixiong would probably not even have the face to even look in their direction. Frankly, it was shocking that he moved to stand beside them.

To Liu Qingge's surprise, his thin-faced love turned to him and began to subtly fret over his health. He kept glancing towards Luo Binghe. The two had a silent conversation, worrying over him.

Ugh.

(Liu Qingge loved them.)

Now that all three of them were together, Liu Qingge felt better. He felt as if nothing could stop them or harm them, as long as they were by another's side.

"Before we delve into that," Tianglang-Jun drawled, eyes shifting from the three of them over to Shang Qinghua, who practically sat within the Mobei prince's lap. Both of them had scooted off into the furthest corner from Tianlang-Jun. One glared threateningly, and the other still appeared pale and uncertain. "I believe there's a certain matter we need to resolve."

Shang Qinghua let out a soft, weak sound. He turned and whispered to his ice demon.

An annoyed growl ripped from the back of the ice demon's throat. He snatched Shang Qinghua's chin in his hand, forcefully turning his face to meet his eyes. "Stop telling this lord to go. He will *never* leave his A-Fei."

Then he kissed him.

Shang Qinghua barely had time to squawk. His legs flew into the air as the Mobei prince wrapped him up in a tight hold, safely in his lap.

Liu Qingge turned away at the shameless display.

"At least they finally figured it out," Luo Binghe said, smirking.

Deciding that didn't need a response, Liu Qingge ignored him.

Shen Qingqiu, on the other hand, murmured, "Oh. So it's like *that."*

Both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge exchanged a glance.

The fan snapped up in front of Shen Qingqiu's face and he hissed, *"What!?* Don't give me that!"

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe said, exasperated and so deeply in love. The corner of his mouth curled with soft delight. He shook his head.

"This master does not know *what* his disciple is implying," Shen Qingqiu grumbled. He snapped the fan closed to rap Luo Binghe on the top of his head.

"To think," Tianlang-Jun cut in, "nearly two decades ago, all the sects would upend everything to trap a single man underneath a mountain for consorting with a cultivator. What would they think, seeing such a display now? Not one, but *three* peak lords now involved

with demons. And not just *any* demons, but heir to the Mobei line and the spawn of the union that inspired all the sects to unite in the first place." His eyes slid over to Yue Qingyuan, accusingly. "You truly expect me to believe that you, who went so far as to face me in battle, would suddenly be so lenient to such affiliations?"

"When the two of us faced," Yue Qingyuan said, staidly, "we had been led to believe that you had captured Head Disciple Su Xiyan. When we recently became reacquainted, it became apparent that you believed otherwise." His eyes flickered towards Shang Qinghua. "And it appears that there is one who might be able to illuminate the truth for us all."

"And you expect me to believe that this *man,"* Tianlang-Jun said as he threw one of his hands towards the An Ding peak lord, his voice dipping into an annoyed growl, "would know such intimate details that occurred *two decades* ago in an entirely different sect?"

With a harsh sound, Mu Qingfang forcefully caught his wrist once again and threw a warning glance at Tianlang-Jun. "Stop moving, and calm down. Begin those breathing exercises we walked through."

"Ah… A-Fang…" Tianlang-Jun breathed out through his nose. He closed his eyes and walked himself through meditative exercises.

"Qinghua-shixiong is a seer," Mu Qingfang said. "As is Shen-shixiong."

Both men in question were startled.

"Seers?" Tianlang-Jun echoed. Demonic qi sparked around him. There was a red glimmer in his eye as he drew attention from one "seer" to the other. "All the seers I've had the pleasure of meeting were all liars. Humans are *so good* at making up stories. Why would this be anything other than that?"

The mood of the room shifted once more.

Liu Qingge tensed, sensing they weren't all out of danger. Any wrong move, and the heavenly demon would be ready to rip them apart. His jaw clenched.

Drawing his shoulders back, Shen Qingqiu took half a step forward. (Wait. How was he standing on his own? How did he seem perfectly okay when Liu Qingge could hardly sit up straight?) Lazily waving his fan, the Qing Jing peak lord said, "You're familiar with the Holy Mausoleum."

Tianlang-Jun's expression shifted. He raised an eyebrow, humored. "This lord is indeed familiar. He shouldn't be surprised that a scholar's peak would house such information about such a sacred place to us demons."

"Knowledge of the Holy Mausoleum is limited to even the generic demonic populace," Shen Qingqiu said, blandly. "Fewer still know that there are three halls: Delight, Fury and Sorrow."

"Difficult information to obtain, certainly. But not impossible."

The corner of Shen Qingqiu's lip curved in his own delight. He then described a trap located within the Hall of Fury – a portrait of a woman's face, along with the sequence of steps it took to cross it safely.

Liu Qingge recalled that Shen Yuan had reread the entirety of PIDW. He had grown embarrassed over it and said he was "studying," though Liu Qingge knew that he only missed this world.

He understood that.

Tianlang-Jun studied Shen Qingqiu for a long, drawn out moment. He hummed. "While that certainly all sounds nice, how am I to test it?"

An annoyed huff escaped Luo Binghe and he crossed his arms. "We don't need to prove *anything* to you."

"On the contrary," Tianlang-Jun said, voice falling into a dangerous whisper. "These next few moments might very well change the fate of the cultivation world." His eyes slid over to the An Ding peak lord. "Your turn."

"*Fuck!"* Shang Qinghua paled. He reached up and tugged his fingers through his hair. "Ah. Uhm. *Uh…"* He rubbed his hands over his face. "Why can't I think of *anything!?"*

With a heavy breath, Shen Qingqiu pinched the bridge of his nose. "Nothing? Qinghua-shidi. Certainly there is *something."*

"Telling me there's something is *not* helping!" Shang Qinghua snapped. "I'm panicking!"

"Then don't."

"*Telling me not to panic isn't helping either!"* Shang Qinghua shouted. "Fuck! Oh, um." He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "Why can I only think of *sex things!?"*

Liu Qingge turned his head away.

They were doomed.

Tianlang-Jun raised an eyebrow and laughed, "Oh ho?"

"Zhuzhi-Lang sometimes has two-" Shang Qinghua started. "Ah. Wait. Anyone can guess that because he's part snake!"

They were all going to die.

Tianlang-Jun started laughing.

"You like being tied up?" Shang Qinghua squeaked.

Now the heavenly demon was laughing even harder. "My dear, most of the jianghu know *that."*

“Fuck!” Shang Qinghua cried.

The Mobei prince leaned in, hand siding over Shang Qinghua’s neck. His thumb soothed up and down his pulse point. “A-Fei. Breathe.”

Shang Qinghua bobbed his head. He slowly melted into the Mobei prince’s touch. He let out a long breath, muttering to himself. Then he brightened. “Oh! Oh!” His eyes flickered to Tianlang-Jun. “When you first ran into Su Xiyan, it was a full moon on a cloudless night. The stars were bright. She stood alone on an abandoned road, with the moonlight haloing her. Even though you stood in the shadows where no human should see you, her eyes were drawn to you. Your first thoughts of her was that she was like a deer. Elegant and cautious. Captivating and beautiful. Unaware of the predator that lurked within the shadows. It wasn’t until you realized how much you had loved her, when you were trapped in the array, that you thought that you had it all wrong. That she was never prey, but the predator. And you were the prey who was hypnotized by her.” He paused to take in a deep breath. “But that wasn’t the case. You thought of her as the very moon that chased away all the darkness, untouchable and far from your grasp. But you were her sun. You chased away the cold when nothing else could. You gave her warmth. You taught her how to love even the simplest things. You taught her how to be *happy.* She loved you more than anything, and that’s why she did everything in her power to make sure Luo Binghe survived. Because even when you two were separated from this life, something, *someone,* born from that love will persist. No one was there to hear her last words, but she only asked for two things: for Luo Binghe to live and to meet *you* in the next life.”

The intensity of Tianlang-Jun’s gaze lessened. For the first time since they had all woken up, his face was wiped clean of any humor. He stared at Shang Qinghua for a long while before he nodded once. Then he said, “Well, Peak Lord Shang. It appears that I may be requesting more information from you about my Xiyan.”

“Oh.” Shang Qinghua laughed nervously. “That’s. Perfect. Great. Yay.”

“We can, of course, accommodate some more times for negotiations about receiving information from our seers at a later date,” Yue Qingyuan said, pleasantly.

The demon emperor hummed, as if considering if he truly wanted to “negotiate.”

“Tianlang-Jun,” Mu Qingfang said. “Now that everything has calmed down, now would be a good time to retreat to your accommodations with the sect leader so that I may treat my martial brothers.” He let go of his wrists. “Do not use that sword for the rest of the day at the very least. I will arrive for your treatment after.”

With a smile, Tianlang-Jun leaned into Mu Qingfang. He studied his expression. “You’re still not phased by me, are you?”

“If you think to continue to harass and threaten my martial brothers,” Mu Qingfang ignored that question, speaking evenly, “or even consider doing any harm to Qinghua-shixiong, this master will be very displeased and disappointed.” He said the last part as if it held the same gravity of a death sentence.

Tianlang-Jun treated it as such, pouting. “As long as they do not harm me or my nephew,” he agreed. Then he took Mu Qingfang’s hand and raised it to his lips as if he were to kiss it.

Nonplussed, Mu Qingfang jerked it from his grasp and flicked his forehead.

“Well,” the heavenly demon said, laughter coloring his voice, “nephew. Shall we?”

The snake demon stepped out from the shadows and turned to Shen Qingqiu. He bowed to him and said, “Master Shen, this one is pleased you are back to yourself.” Then he moved to follow his uncle out from the caverns.

Yue Qingyuan cast the room a glance and said, “This master will escort our esteemed guest back to his rooms. He will reconvene with you all later.” Then he moved to walk out after Tianlang-Jun.

As soon as the heavenly demons were gone, it felt as if the volatile air had finally settled. Liu Qingge sighed. If he were alone, he might have collapsed in a heap. He had too much pride to let his guard down in such a way. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shen Qingqiu looking like he, too, wished he had a little less pride and could just dissolve to the ground.

Only Shang Qinghua, who shared all their sentiments, was able to voice what everyone was undoubtedly thinking. “Well. That fucking *sucked.”*

“Mn.” The Mobei prince soothed a hand over Shang Qinghua’s hair, watching his face closely.

“‘A-Fei’ is it?” Mu Qingfang asked.

Shang Qinghua gulped. His widened eyes flickered over to Mu Qingfang. His ice demon growled possessively.

“Before we get into that,” Shen Qingqiu said, tiredly. “Does Mu-shidi care to enlighten us on how *Tianlang-Jun* was freed from Bail Lu Mountain?”

“Yeah, hold on. Before *anything* else…” Shang Qinghua said accusingly, pointing a finger at Mu Qingfang. “‘A-Fang!?’”

Chapter End Notes

Those of you expecting Bingge - that was an alternate route i was considering when I first began this fic! NGL, maybe one day I will write an alternate ending because it was a fun idea. It just... would have taken too long.

Besides, Tianlang-Jun is one of my favorite deadbeat dads. Of course I had to give him a little spotlight.

HMMM, what *has* "A-Fang" and the sect leader been up to these past few months? I wonder!

Thank you so much for your support and for reading!!

As we're finishing up this fic, keep an eye out for Shang Qinghua's/Xiang Fei's point of view for this entire debacle. I've had a lot of fun writing his POV on the side.

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

6.9k roughly a 28 min reading time.

First: you may have noticed chapter total change. I... have no excuses... but it will be the last one.

Second, my apologies for the delay. In a dramatic twist of irony, once SY has escaped his fate in his mortal world, my health drops quite drastically. Updates may not happen weekly anymore. I will try my best!

I do not believe there are any content warnings for this chapter. If you believe otherwise, please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Face clean of any emotion, Mu Qingfang drew across the cavern. Each step he took towards Shang Qinghua made the small peak lord gulp and shrink, his knees tucking up close to his chest. Once the Qian Cao peak lord reached both him and Mobei, he gracefully sank down into a squat. Then he stared Shang Qinghua in the eye.

“M-M-Mu-shidi?” Shang Qinghua stammered.

“Ah? It’s ‘Mu-shidi’ now?” Mu Qingfang said, the corners of his lips pulling into a bland smile. “This shidi assumed we were on familiar terms, *Fei-shixiong.”*

“No! Nope! We’re *not* doing that!”

There was a satisfied curl in the corner of Mu Qingfang’s lips. He held out a hand. “If Shixiong wouldn’t mind, please allow this doctor to examine your health.”

“O-Oh.” Shang Qinghua extended a slender wrist.

Mu Qingfang wrapped his fingers around the proffered limb and closed his eyes to concentrate.

“…you seem…” Shang Qinghua started, then snapped his mouth shut.

“Upset? Frustrated? Annoyed? Why, Shixiong, do you think this doctor would be upset? What would give you that idea? There’s no particular reason, is there?”

Luo Binghe drew his eyes between the two peak lords, surprised at the familiarity between the two. He turned his attention back to Liu Qingge and continued to feed him spiritual qi as

he massaged his muscles.

“Years ago,” Liu Qingge said, thoughtfully, “Shang Qinghua had a severe qi deviation.” He also watched the two with a small furrow in his brow. “He was stuck on Qian Cao Peak for some time. After that they started having tea together.”

“Really?” Shen Qingqiu pondered. He drew closer to the two of them and perched on the edge of the bed, tapping his fan against his chin.

Every small action each of them took made fire burn through Luo Binghe. He had forgotten how *strongly* he felt as a demon. He wanted to kiss his shizun fiercely and squeeze him against his chest. He wanted to smother his shishu with his body, pry open his jaws, and feed him his blood to figure out what the hell was wrong with him.

It wasn’t as bad as having Xin Mo. Still, he was ashamed of how much even the smallest things affected him. He felt like he was a teenager again, dealing with hormones and the wild influx of emotions. At any second, he felt like he could burst into tears.

They were *back.*

His shizun was going to live. His shishu could see his family. They were *home.*

“N-No! No, Qingfang-shidi, mercy! Mercy!!” Shang Qinghua yelped.

Mu Qingfang had a cold, almost terrifying smile as he said, “You are efficient and well organized. You keep both the sect and your peak running optimally, and not to mention-“

As the doctor continued on, Luo Binghe deadpanned and asked, “Is Mu-shishu… complimenting Shang Qinghua as a form of torture?”

The corner of Shen Qingqiu’s lips pulled into a smile that he hid behind his fan. “Mn. It would appear so. Apparently Mu-shidi is upset that Qinghua-shidi did not request help from him when he was experiencing the ‘curse.’”

“You should try that,” Liu Qingge told him. “Compliment him.”

Shen Qingqiu’s face twisted into revulsion, and he turned to look at the war god in disbelief.

Laughter brightened Liu Qingge’s eyes.

The teasing made Luo Binghe grin. He loved it when the war god provoked his shizun. The two continued to banter, poking and prodding another with familiar ease. He lost himself in it, his shishu’s subtle smiles and his shizun’s dramatized anger. He was only half aware of his hands, following along once well-toned legs.

A hand snatched his wrist. Luo Binghe froze, startled.

The bantering came to a stop.

Liu Qingge held a stern look, a light blush coloring his cheeks. “…watch it.”

Ah. His fingers had drawn up his shishu's inner thigh. Luo Binghe bit back a satisfied smirk and blinked innocently up at his war god. "Shishu? What is it? Is this Binghe hurting you?"

"Qingge," Shen Qingqiu twisted to face the both fully. "What's wrong? Do you need more qi? Should I call Mu-shidi-" His eyes dropped to Luo Binghe's hands. All the words dried up in his throat and his mouth snapped shut.

With impish glee, Luo Binghe let them slide northward.

A surprised grunt escaped from Liu Qingge.

"B-Binghe!" Shen Qingqiu cried. His neck and ears reddened.

"Y-You-!" Liu Qingge hissed.

Luo Binghe laughed, escaping the swatting hands of the war god and side-stepping his shizun's fan. He grinned at the two of them, overwhelmed all at once by how *happy* he was. All three of them were *safe.* They were home. And they loved him.

He…

He really loved them.

He loved them so much.

It was a massive feeling that ballooned within his chest, making it hard to breathe. His skin prickled.

The performative anger slid away from Shizun and he looked horrified. "Binghe? What's going on?"

Looks like the tears won. Luo Binghe tried to speak, but was cut off by his own choked breath. He reached up and wiped away his tears, trying to clean his face.

(It was going to take some time getting used to being a demon again, wasn't it?)

"Cry baby," Liu Qingge teased. He held open an arm.

Before his shishu could think any better of it, Luo Binghe threw himself forward and latched onto him. He squeezed him tightly, wanting nothing more than to absorb his beloved into his bones. He wanted to keep both of his loves in a place where they would always be safe. The possessiveness was hard to fight. His teeth ached to sink into his shishu. He wanted to crush him.

For now, he shamelessly pressed his face into his shishu's too-thin chest and held him close.

Shizun sat once more on the edge of the bed and lightly rested a hand on his ankle. His thumb idly traced circles. It was almost funny how he had so quickly reverted back to the social boundaries within this world while his shishu was far too used to the lax norms of the other

world. The three of them had lived so intimately together for so long, how could they step back from that?

“Don’t recruit him!” Shang Qinghua cried from across the large space. He whirled around to throw a betrayed look at Mobei. “*My king!* Why are you listening to him?!”

“A-Fei is very knowledgeable,” Mobei said with a nod. His face was clean of any emotion, but Luo Binghe recognized the sparkle of laughter in the ice demon’s eyes.

When did he learn to read the ice demon so well?

“Hey,” Liu Qingge muttered, “this is improper.”

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe whined and pressed his face into his chest. Underneath his ear, he heard the quickening tempo of a heartbeat. The war god’s strength buckled and they collapsed into a heap of limbs.

“*Binghe,”* Liu Qingge growled.

“Mn, Binghe…” Shen Qingqiu squeezed his ankle. “We can’t be so publicly familiar. It might make others uncomfortable.”

Sighing heavily, Luo Binghe hid his face. He knew.

The selfish part of him wondered why he would care if anyone else were uncomfortable. But he knew both of his beloved cared, so he would *attempt* some restraint.

…after he held his shishu a little longer.

“Thanking Shen-shixiong for his courtesy,” Mu Qingfang said as he drew near to the three of them, overhearing the last piece of their conversation. He did not seem all that surprised to see Luo Binghe draped over Liu Qingge. He held a politely indifferent smile as he held out a hand to Shen Qingqiu. “If this shidi could examine his shixiong?”

Shen Qingqiu offered a wrist. “Does Mu-shidi know why Qingge is having more difficulties than the rest of us?”

“This master expects the Qing Jing peak lord to have already come to his own conclusions.” Mu Qingfang had the slightest of smiles coloring his face.

“Ah…” Shen Qingqiu answered, trying not to sound abashed. “This shixiong would… prefer confirming his theories over voicing them.”

With a fond shake of his head, Mu Qingfang explained, “We were able to locate Qinghua-shixiong and his ice demon within a few days after your disappearance. We were able to maintain treatment for them for almost the entire time during your… absence.” He fell silent, his eyebrows knotting together in concentration. With a nod, he let go before reaching out for Luo Binghe.

That surprised him. The Qian Cao peak lord read his hesitance and gave him a glance as a warning, as if Luo Binghe were being unruly. He offered his wrist after a moment of shock.

Cool fingers wrapped around his skin and a tendril of qi sank into his meridians. As the doctor assessed his health, he continued, “That was not the case for the rest of you.” Mu Qingfang fell silent again, a frown troubling his lips.

“What?” Liu Qingge asked, wondering if the doctor found anything off about Luo Binghe’s meridians.

“Ah…” Mu Qingfang let go. “This one was considering if it was worth saying…” He glanced at Shen Qingqiu. “You were held captive for some time. Your conditions should have been more severe. After this shidi was able to, he visited as often as permitted to treat you two. Shen-shixiong’s health is second best out of everyone, because he has blood parasites that have stimulated his muscles and prevented any atrophy. As for Liu-shixiong…” He paused again, eyebrows furrowing. “...at times, when this shidi visited, Shen-shixiong would be up and sitting at Liu-shixiong’s bedside. After checking Liu-shixiong’s health, it appeared that he had already received treatment.”

Shen Qingqiu stared at the doctor, shocked.

“I… suspect that’s partially why Shen-shixiong is fairing so well,” the doctor continued. “Considering that you were moving.” His eyes fell. Luo Binghe couldn’t decide if that meant that there was something more the doctor was hiding, or if he simply was troubled by the information in itself. He finally added, “You were never responsive.”

Face falling, Shizun played with his fan. His eyebrows sank together. He drifted away into his thoughts.

“‘You two?’” Luo Binghe echoed. Earlier, the doctor had commented that he had only needed to treat the two of them. He wondered if his heavenly demonic side made it so-

“Tianlang-Jun had possessed your body,” Mu Qingfang answered.

Luo Binghe felt Liu Qingge jolt underneath him. He also saw his shizun nearly drop his fan.

“It was a fairly recent development that he had freed his own body,” Mu Qingfang stated. “He was having difficulty with the dual systems of spiritual and demonic qi, and required this master’s support and medical advice.”

That explained “A-Fang.” Between Mu Qingfang having to treat both Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu *and* that certain someone, the two had plenty of time to get to know each other over these past few months.

“So… Qingge is the worst off because he got the least amount of treatment,” Shen Qingqiu said, clarifying the issue aloud.

“And you’re a cheater,” Liu Qingge grumbled.

Shen Qingqiu lifted his fan to cover the lower half of his face and glared at the war god. “It’s not like this master willingly *volunteered* to be…” His eyes slide aside to glance at Luo Binghe.

Maybe Luo Binghe should be guilty about force feeding his shizun his blood — but he wasn’t. His shizun was safe and (mostly) healthy. Why would he ever wish for anything else?

“Cheating or *not,* it is effective,” Mu Qingfang continued. He took Liu Qingge’s wrist, continuing his examination. “It is too bad that it has no effect on Without a Cure, but at the very least it mitigates it.” His eyebrows raised. “Although, according to Tianlang-Jun such issues will no longer persist after the three of you work on resolving the ‘curse.’”

“Mu-shidi!” Shen Qingqiu hissed, hiding behind his fan.

The war god choked in embarrassment and turned his head away.

Luo Binghe only smiled.

“Oh, stop it,” Mu Qingfang sighed. “At this exact moment, the three of you are sharing a bed and your disciple is currently laying on top of Liu-shixiong. What is there to be embarrassed about?”

The fan lifted and covered the entirety of Shen Qingqiu’s face.

Humor crinkled the corners of Mu Qingfang’s eyes. He nodded to Liu Qingge and ran through a treatment plan to help him regain control of his body. He warned the war god that it may take months before he made a full recovery. Liu Qingge nodded seriously throughout, though his eyes continued to stray to Shen Qingqiu every now and then.

Once the doctor reached a pause in his lecture, Liu Qingge turned to Luo Binghe and demanded, “Once you put it in, can you take it back out?”

There was a weighted silence.

Luo Binghe quickly gathered what was on his shishu’s mind. Rather than letting the innuendous words hang in the air, he decided to be merciful and answer, “This Binghe can, yes.” He brought himself into a sitting position, mournfully extracting himself from his shishu’s warmth. He took in breath. Face falling flat, he met the war god’s gaze. He knew he looked dangerous; the red hue from his zuiyin glinted in his shishu’s pupils. “I will be able to track you wherever you are. I will even be able to control you, if I wanted. There is nothing you could do to stop me.”

Liu Qingge stared deeply into his eyes. Without hesitation, he said, “You wouldn’t.”

Emotion burst inside of Luo Binghe’s chest and quickly clogged his throat. His eyes glistened and he tightened his jaw to stop himself from crying *again.* His shishu trusted him. He trusted him with *everything.* His freewill. His body. His life.

The barest hint of a smile softened Liu Qingge's face. He weakly punched Luo Binghe's shoulder and said, "Cry baby." He looked like he wanted to kiss him. After some extended eye contact, he crossed his arms and said, "I'll do it."

"Curious." Mu Qingfang sat back on his heels and rubbed his chin. "Liu-shixiong, can this shidi monitor your recovery with the blood parasites?"

Raising an eyebrow, Liu Qingge glanced at the doctor cautiously. "Mn."

"Shishu is sure?" Luo Binghe asked, chest tight. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. He kept trying to push them back down.

"Yes!" Liu Qingge said, determined. The war god wasn't ever one to sit still. The very thought of having to wait *months* before he would be back on his feet would be torture for the man. This was a mercy.

With little ceremony, Luo Binghe broke the skin on his finger and fed his shishu his blood.

It put him at ease, now that he was able to always know where the two were. He would know they were *safe.*

Though… as much as the idea terrified him, Luo Binghe would extract his blood parasites from either of his beloved if they asked.

They trusted him. And… he trusted them.

Whatever the reason, he knew it would be for the best.

(It… was nice being home.)

After all five of the "curse" victims refreshed themselves, threw on new sets of robes, and passed the final round of examinations, they were finally led through a discrete hallway into the heart of Qiong Ding Peak. Even though they were unlikely to run into any other disciples, Luo Binghe hid his heavenly demon aspects.

Mobei stopped tugging disdainfully at his borrowed cultivator robes to sweep Shang Qinghua up into his arms once the An Ding peak lord started flagging. The small man gave a small squeak and stammered embarrassed protests that were hushed by a sharp look.

It had taken a while for Liu Qingge to get used to the blood parasites. Every now and then he twitched and slapped his hand over a quivering muscle as the blood parasites worked to strengthen and rebuild his musculature.

Now with intimate insight, Luo Binghe had a better understanding of how well the war god was at pushing his limits. He knew that the man must be exhausted, yet he continued to walk

with perfect posture. He seemed to glow, quietly pleased that he was now able to walk on his own two feet.

Mu Qingfang stopped at a nondescript door in the hallway and flashed a special seal over the center. It opened on its own. He motioned the five of them inside, promising to be back with tea and food.

Once the five of them were left alone, they all took their places around a table. Without question, they all sank into old habits. One side of the table occupied Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge, and Shen Qingqiu. The other held Shang Qinghua and Mobei.

At the end, both Shen Yuan and Shang Qinghua sank into an explosive conversation about *that man* which was mostly his shizun berating the squirrely An Ding peak lord for leaving "monumental character depth" and "actually intriguing backstory" out of the novel.

His attention turned to Mobei. The ice demon only dragged his eyes away from his human to give Luo Binghe a small nod.

It would be easy to drag the ice demon into a conversation on how they should go about reinstating back into the demonic realm, but… it was easier to just sink into the argumentative ramblings of both "Master Airplane" and "Peerless Cucumber."

As he listened to the two of them talk, he began to realize something: Shang Qinghua did not annoy him as much as he once did.

There had always been a part of him that disliked the man on many fronts: for helping orchestrate the Immortal Conference, being closer to his shizun in a way he couldn't be, and…

(Luo Binghe saw an echo of himself in the man. He… hated that echo. He didn't want to think about it too much.)

As much as he tried to search for it, he couldn't find that burn of jealousy or dislike. There was no longer that wall between his shizun and himself anymore. He was able to follow along with their arguing, having more context on how they viewed the world. Also… he saw how his shizun lit up during these impassioned discussions. Shizun liked to dissect literary devices, and "Master Airplane" enjoyed playing his part of the clown.

(Luo Binghe did not miss how Shang Qinghua always made himself out to be more stupid than he actually was. He was somewhat irritated with himself that he had fallen for that lowly, shameless act.

He had just forgotten that he wasn't the only one taught to bend and cower so others would not break him.)

Both "Peerless Cucumber" and "Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky" had a weird relationship, and it wasn't one that Luo Binghe could ever replicate himself.

Not that he wanted to; not anymore.

“Are there any *more* heavenly demons we should be anticipating?” Shen Qingqiu asked, harshly.

“I mean, at this point…” Shang Qinghua lifted his hands and started counting off his fingers. “With the whole ‘A-Fang’ business, maybe there *should* be more. There are twelve peak lords, afterall.”

Shen Qingqiu sneered at him, ears growing red, which was exactly what Shang Qinghua had intended.

As the shorter man idly sat back in his chair, he tried to fight a delighted smirk. “Which one of our sect siblings do you think would be into DP? But with one guy?”

“*Xiang Fei!”* Shen Yuan cried, scandalized.

“Why hoard all the heavenly demons?” Luo Binghe asked, his lip curling mischievously. “Cang Qiong Sect should show some magnanimity. Why not Gongyi Xiao?”

To his surprise (and shocking delight,) Shang Qinghua threw his head back and *cackled.* He would have fallen from his seat if Mobei hadn’t reached out to help him keep his balance. As soon as Shang Qinghua’s laughter calmed, he seemed to realize who made him laugh in the first place. He threw a horrified look at Luo Binghe and started choking on his own spit. Mobei had to clap his back to help him clear his airways.

Ah… maybe Mu Qingfang *did* have the right idea in mind. Being nice to Shang Qinghua was *so much* more fun than it was to threaten him.

Just as Liu Qingge murmured, “DP…?” the door to the room opened. Mu Qingfang stepped in with a few Qian Cao disciples following him – the few who were in the Ling Xi Caves when they awoke.

As soon as food and tea were served, the disciples left in a rush. Mu Qingfang took a seat at the table. “The sect leader will be with us shortly to answer any questions any of you may have.”

Slightly more polite conversation passed over the table. Mu Qingfang did not seem to mind one bit that he sat nearest to two demons. He was at ease, sipping tea. Though despite his best acting, fatigue dragged every single one of his movements. These past few months must have been challenging.

From what little Luo Binghe had seen of his f-

Of… *that man,* he could understand.

After they finished their meal and it was cleaned up by the disciples, the sect leader finally returned.

With a polite facade, Yue Qingyuan sat at the head of the table. He greeted everyone in order, then said, “This master suspects that his shidi and guests are eager to learn what has occurred during their absence…?”

“Yes, please, Zhangmen-shixiong,” Shen Qingqiu said, politely.

With a nod, Yue Qingyuan began.

More than six months have passed in this world.

The jianghu had been in an uproar, sects demanding the three of them to be apprehended. Wild theories grew like weeds, and the Cang Qiong sect even had difficulty uniting its own members. At first, most of everyone suspected wicked spells or curses placed on both Shen Qingqiu and Liu Qingge to get them to act as they had.

Then… a certain fable hit the general populace.

(When Yue Qingyuan got to explaining this particular part in the story, his eyes fell away to the side for a moment. There was some slight coloring in his ears.)

The Regret of Chunshan.

It was apparently an… inspired novel that told the romantic and tragic tale between Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe.

(At this, his shizun’s fan covered his entire face.)

A few days after that, Shang Qinghua was discovered in his own leisure house with a demon. Worried about his disappearance, Mu Qingfang had been the one to discover him.

(“Aw,” Shang Qinghua said, hand pressing to his chest. “You really do care.”

Mu Qingfang leaned forward to toss him a chilling smile. “Do *not* get this Qingfang started.”)

It did not take too long to realize that Shang Qinghua and the demon were afflicted with the same curse that Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe, and Liu Qingge were under. Though, in both cases the energy circulation was isolated to each group.

(As far as they could tell, at least. Luo Binghe had some differing insights that he did not share.)

A month passed. No one was able to find the location of the missing trio. Interest in the Regret of Chunshan was only growing, and the jianghu’s opinion wildly vacillated between sympathy and scorn.

Finally, Luo Binghe showed up at their gates. He strode up the mountain with a languid smile and glinting red eyes.

By that time, Cang Qiong Sect still hadn't united on the front of what to do with the heavenly demon who may or may not have enchanted two of their peak lords. So… Yue Qingyuan met with him on his own.

(...at this point in time, Luo Binghe had already realized that the *other man* was in possession of his body at this point and it wasn't *himself.* He still felt the need to protest, and his shishu squeezed his hand underneath the table.)

The wayward disciple was acting strange and seemed shocked to hear about a "curse." He refused to answer on where the missing peak lords were and how he was able to leave their sides.

After some… *extended* discussion, "Luo Binghe" finally made an offer:

The Cang Qiong sect would return Xin Mo to him, or he would raze the entire mountain to the ground.

Mightily, he flexed his immense power – and had a qi deviation.

Yue Qingyuan summoned Mu Qingfang and the two were quickly able to treat the qi deviation. The dual systems of qi were difficult for *that man* to manage, with little to no training on spiritual cultivation. After stabilizing *that man,* Mu Qingfang walked him through basic practices to help prevent any further qi deviations.

It apparently tipped some unknown scale.

("Ahh… 'A-Fang,'" Shang Qinghua said with a nod of understanding.

"*Qinghua-shixiong."*

The sect leader cleared his throat.)

Now "Luo Binghe" was willing to have a real conversation – by trading information with Yue Qingyuan and Mu Qingfang. Most of the information that the demon demanded was information about Shen Qingqiu and his relationship with Luo Binghe.

Piece by piece, Yue Qingyuan and Mu Qingfang were able to figure out what had happened.

The figure before them was none other than *that man,* the former demon emperor. His nephew had a run-in with Shen Qingqiu some years back, which eventually had allowed *that man* to escape the confines of Bai Lu Mountain in a mushroom body.

(Here Liu Qingge threw a glare towards Shen Qingqiu, who hid his surprised expression behind a fan.)

The mushroom body had a cultivation base of spiritual qi; it was not conducive to *that man's* demonic base, which meant that it would eventually fail him. He had planned to possess his wayward son and destroy all the cultivation sects. Though, due to his nephew having a soft spot for Shen Qingqiu, he had tried to pull him away from the cultivation world via framing him with the sowers in Jin Lan City.

After that plan had failed, his nephew had stalked the Qing Jing peak lord's footsteps in an attempt to kidnap the peak lord himself and bring him back to the demonic realm.

Then the Huan Hua sect showed up at Cang Qiong Mountain.

Shen Qingqiu, Luo Binghe, and Liu Qingge all ran right into the snake demon's hand. The three passed out, and the nephew stole them all away into the demonic realm. There, echoes of what occurred among the sects reached *that man* and his nephew.

Then… the former demonic emperor ran into the Regret of Chunshan.

What sort of man was one who would lay down his reputation and his position for a demon? Was the love between them true? What other reasons would make a righteous cultivator turn the entire world against him, just to protect that same demon? Greatly intrigued by Shen Qingqiu, *that man* had decided to personally investigate.

As it appeared, he wasn't disappointed.

That led to the deal; the Cang Qiong sect needed the return of their peak lords and disciple. *That man* wanted Xin Mo and needed to free his original body.

So, they agreed: Cang Qiong Sect would support him in his endeavors to free his physical form and help in his recovery thereafter. He would return the bodies of the trio and, upon receiving Xin Mo, he would help with the ritual to return their souls.

The last bit apparently had been an addendum, after Mu Qingfang discovered how much the curse had worsened. Wei Qingwei also had enough time to study Xin Mo to know how cursed the blade actually was, and that gave them slightly more leverage to build connection with *that man.*

And now they were all caught up.

Shen Qingqiu leaned back in his seat, pondering. He tapped his fan against his chin in deep thought.

"So… you're going to let him go through with destroying all the sects?" Shang Qinghua asked, his eyes flickering in Luo Binghe's direction.

According to the book, that was Luo Binghe's job. Though, also according to the book, he was supposed to have hundreds of wives. Neither of those things were currently, or will ever be, on his to-do list.

(If *that man* had already taken the whole "destroy the world" route, why would Luo Binghe follow in his footsteps? The two were *nothing* alike.)

Yue Qingyuan shook his head. “There was only so much this shixiong could do to ensure the safety of his shidi. The Cang Qiong sect will attempt to mitigate any damage we can, of course.”

With a curious glance, Luo Binghe narrowed his eyes on the sect leader. The man sat with an unbending spine, expression serene, as he sipped tea to soothe his throat. He seemed complacent – just a man with his hands tied, unable to do more than bargain with a demon. Except…

On the other side of the table, Shen Qingqiu opened and closed his fan. He was coming to the same conclusions as Luo Binghe.

“...that works in our favor, doesn’t it?” Shizun said, thoughtful. His fan snapped open and he peered over at the sect leader. “The fact that Tianlang-Jun will occupy most of everyone’s mind. He has possibly already made some major movements in both realms – and now that he has Xin Mo, it’s not as if anyone will be able to ignore him.”

Yue Qingyuan gave Shen Qingqiu an innocent glance. “Ah… this shixiong supposes Shen-shidi is right.”

As if he hadn’t planned all of it.

“Who all knows we are here?” Luo Binghe asked.

The sect leader’s eyes shifted to him. He smiled. “In order to allay any demands from the other sects, only a select few know.”

Just as he thought.

“…none of the other peak lords know,” Shang Qinghua added with a dawning realization. He stared at Yue Qingyuan in a way that Luo Binghe was all too familiar with. The man *understood* them. It was possibly what Luo Binghe found most discomforting about him; because while both Liu Qingge and Shen Yuan accepted the ugly sides of Luo Binghe, it was Shang Qinghua who knew how *dark* and ugly that Luo Binghe could get. He knew on an intimate level. At the moment, he was watching Yue Qingyuan in that same *knowing* and *understanding* way.

Suddenly, Luo Binghe did not feel as if he were the only monster in the room.

“Ah, we had to involve Qi-shimei,” Yue Qingyuan corrected with a small smile. “And Wei-shidi.”

“The sword,” Shen Qingqiu said with a nod.

“And the rumors,” Shang Qinghua finished. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin with an awed smile. “While Big Daddy is throwing a tantrum, attention is redirected and-“

“Stop.” Shen Qingqiu threw Shang Qinghua a sour look. “What the-“ he bit off his next few words and straightened, using the fan to shield his face. “You’re depraved.”

“Attention is redirected, rumors placed to sway public opinion, popularity of a love story grows, and if the Huan Hua sect, who led the condemnation of Shizun, just so happens to be *eliminated…”* Luo Binghe continued.

“This master would *never* condemn another righteous sect to such a fate,” Yue Qingyuan said, looking serene.

Righteous, he had stated. As if the Huan Hua Palace was ever *righteous.*

Shang Qinghua whistled.

“Zhangmen-shixiong had it handled,” Liu Qingge said, smugly.

Luo Binghe shared a disbelieving glance with his shizun.

“We’ll still have to lay low,” Shen Qingqiu said with a frown. “And we can’t let Tianlang-Jun run rampant.”

“Ah, it just so happens that we’re negotiating with him,” Yue Qingyuan said. “It really is rather serendipitous that the demonic emperor has Mu-shidi to help with any ongoing health issues. It must be nice, Mu-shidi, having an enthusiastic patient to work with.”

Mu Qingfang gave the sect leader an aggrieved glance.

(…had Yue Qingyuan somehow *orchestrated* the qi deviation within *that man?)*

“Even more fortuitous that we have two of our own seers that could be extremely useful in unearthing any nefarious affairs that may have transpired so many years ago,” Yue Qingyuan added with a perfectly practiced smile.

“We expose the Old Palace Master,” Shang Qinghua translated, thoughtfully. “That would take the heat off Shen Qingqiu.”

“Not completely,” Shen Qingqiu said, disquieted. “…this master… made quite the scene.”

“The Old Palace Master is a wise and old cultivator, with an immense collection of countless strange elixirs and artifacts. Who knows what all he has access to?” The sect leader did not meet Shen Qingqiu in the eye. His gaze flitted to the side as he ran a finger along the rim of his cup. “Who is to say how this lover’s curse affects the three of you? The connection between you three may allow for an affliction placed on one of you to pass onto the other…”

Beside him, Liu Qingge stiffened and reddened. At the end of the table, Shen Qingqiu hid behind his fan.

Ah… his thin-faced beloved.

“You want to make it seem as if the Old Palace Master had used immoral means to influence Shizun’s actions,” Luo Binghe said. This man was much more terrifying than he had ever given him credit for. How had he devised such a complex plan in as little as six months?

“This master would never,” Yue Qingyuan said in a no-nonsense tone, with the perfect amount of affront to make it seem almost genuine. “Any who throw false accusations should be faced with justice.”

The Old Palace Master had thrown *plenty* of false accusations.

“Are we to stay low until *that man* compiles enough evidence to stake his case? Perhaps until he has publicly ransacked the Huan Hua Palace? How convenient that we pop up after such a spectacle. If others were to *assume* that the Old Palace Master had us imprisoned…”

“It is difficult to control public opinion,” Yue Qingyuan dismissed the idea with a shake of his head.

As if it hadn’t been his every intention.

“What of the fact that three of your peak lords are involved with demons?” Luo Binghe demanded.

Yue Qingyuan met his eye.

“Four,” Shang Qinghua corrected.

“*Qinghua-shixiong,”* Mu Qingfang snapped.

The An Ding peak lord giggled.

“As it appears, it is a new age,” Yue Qingyuan said, eyes never leaving Luo Binghe. “The Cang Qiong sect will head the dawning of a new era – of peace between all the realms. It of course will be beneficial for all to know of Disciple Luo’s heroic deeds and his dedication to his sect and shizun.”

Luo Binghe narrowed his eyes. “Why turn the new leaf?”

“It’s… not that,” Shang Qinghua said. His brown eyes had that *deep* understanding again as he studied the sect leader. That look always stripped Luo Binghe and made him feel vulnerable. Seeing it turned on someone else was still discomforting.

Shizun winced. “It’s not as if there is much choice in the matter. Either Zhangmen-shixiong expels a third of the peak lords within the sect, two of which are highly critical to the sect’s functions-“

“*Excuse you,”* Shang Qinghua squawked.

“I was talking *about* you, you f-“ Shen Yuan breathed out through his nose and stopped the swear by biting his tongue. He straightened in his seat, glaring and casually waving his fan in front of his face. “As this master was *saying,”* he continued. “An Ding and Bai Zhan are critical to the functionality of the sect. One ensuring all internal systems are running smoothly, and the other making certain that the sect is safe and protected.”

“Losing our lead strategist has been quite a hit to the sect as well,” Yue Qingyuan added. There was nothing different to his tone than it was before, but everyone at the table froze.

Has been – as if their strategist had already been lost.

Liu Qingge surged to his feet, hand catching onto the hilt of his sword. He stared at Yue Qingyuan, jaw clenched.

There was no point in Luo Binghe leaping to his feet as well. The sect leader had known for a while that Shen Yuan was not the Shen Qingqiu he once knew. If the man had planned to do anything about it, making deals with heavenly demons and orchestrating the fall of another sect for Shen Qingqiu’s honor wouldn’t be a part of his plans.

Placidly, Yue Qingyuan smiled at Liu Qingge. “Qingge-shidi need not worry,” he said. “This shixiong knows Shen-shidi is as critical of a strategist, albeit in a different manner.”

Shen Yuan hid completely behind his fan, trying to mask the unease in his eyes.

“You’re fine with it, then?” Luo Binghe asked. He drew in the regal air that he had refined after earning the throne, shoulders straight and back unbending. There was no need for him to show off his qi. They had already watched him fight *that man.* They knew how powerful he was. And this time he would have the Bai Zhan War God at his side should the sect leader-

Liu Qingge prodded him with a disapproving grunt.

Withholding a smile, Luo Binghe corrected, “*Zhangmen-shibo* is fine with it then?”

Yue Qingyuan stared him in the eye and somehow he could sense that extra question: *With which part?* Was the sect leader alright with demons parading around with his martial brothers?

Was it alright that a complete stranger had taken over Shen Qingqiu?

There had never been a reason for Luo Binghe to try and find out more about the sect leader. He had never cared. Now he wondered if he would ever regret that. He had a feeling that there were two completely different answers to each of those questions.

For the first time since he’s ever been in Yue Qingyuan’s presence, Luo Binghe realized that the man’s smile never reached his eyes. It was a well practiced smile, with the motions of his eyes crinkling ever so slightly. But it was as real as someone painting a river. Even if the waters glistened, it would never quench anyone’s thirst. “Luo-shizhi. This shibo meant what he said.”

What *had* Yue Qingyuan said?

Nothing.

The man had perfectly answered nothing. Luo Binghe wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that non-answer. If he could not trust Yue Qingyuan’s words, he could trust his actions.

Despite figuring out the truth about Shizun, he had done everything he could to get them back. Even if that meant negotiating with demons.

“This lord suspects that Yue Qingyuan has more he wishes to *negotiate*?” Luo Binghe asked, dawning on a mantle he hadn’t worn for over two months now.

“Ah, if Luo-shizhi wishes to,” Yue Qingyuan said, as if he hadn’t already drafted terms and stipulations for them. “This one thinks it best to address single concerns at a time.” His eyes lifted to Shang Qinghua and Mobei. “During our conversation, perhaps Mu-shidi wishes to catch up with his shixiong.”

It was a clean and polite dismissal of the other three.

“He would,” Mu Qingfang said. He rose out of his seat and respectfully exited the room.

With a nervous laugh, Shang Qinghua eased up onto his feet and followed him out. As he passed Shen Yuan, he bumped his shoulder with a fist and said, “Good luck, bro.”

“No one wants you,” Shen Yuan said icily. “Stop touching me.”

Mobei walked in Shang Qinghua’s shadow, ready to support him should his body weaken.

As soon as the door shut, strained silence stretched taut. Liu Qingge slowly sank back down into his seat, leaning heavily on the table as he did. His legs shook minutely. He crossed his arms and frowned thoughtfully at the head of the table.

Yue Qingyuan continued to smile amicably.

“...I’m sorry,” Shen Yuan blurted.

It startled all three of them.

The expression on Yue Qingyuan’s face twisted. It was the first real feeling to sink into his features. It was ugly; sorrow, anger, and grief. He turned his head away from all three of them, eyes falling shut as he counted his breaths. In a moment, he had full control over his expression. “Shen-shidi, this shixiong has appreciated getting to know you over these past few years. He is also aware that you had no choice in the matter.”

“He died,” Shen Yuan continued, voice small. He allowed his fan to sink away from his face, so that Yue Qingyuan could see his honesty. “That’s… the only reason why this one… stepped in.”

Yue Qingyuan’s expression didn’t shift – but his eyes started to glisten.

In that face Luo Binghe saw a fraction of himself. He saw what it had felt like to lose everything that had ever mattered to him. He saw his own grief of watching Shen Yuan fade before him. He saw his own failures. As a quiet mercy, he quietly redirected the conversation, “When can Shizun return to his peak?”

Even if his question was impertinent and assuming – that his shizun *would* have a peak to return to and he *would* return to it – it was the rope that Yue Qingyuan needed. He hauled himself (perhaps only temporarily) out of the hole he had fallen into. The negotiations started.

Despite the man acting as if it had been Luo Binghe's idea, he had a *lot* of conditions for the three of them.

Luo Binghe supposed that it was all fair, as long as his shizun, his shishu, and he could all return home.

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to point out a few things: in this fic, the shift between Shen Yuan and Shen Qingqiu is very purposeful on my part. When Shen Yuan is addressed as "Shen Yuan" - that means he let his mask slip and is no longer playing the part of immortal master.

Also, LBH has so many daddy issues... he won't even call *that man* by name.

I love giving characters slightly more depth. XF and MQF have a past that won't be looked into too much in this fic, but it will be expanded upon once I get XF's story out.

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

4.9k, roughly a 21 minute reading time

Thanks to everyone for their well wishes!! I did it!! I... still can't promise weekly updates.

I can't believe we've made it so far - and I am both excited to reach the end and also a little sad to.

CW: Unreliable narrator, repressing some emotions (nice job SY) and some mildly sexual content. These boys be horny.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The “conversation” with Yue Qingyuan lasted far longer than Shen Qingqiu had expected it to. By the time they were finally released, his head was buzzing. He had no idea how Luo Binghe kept a sharp mind during it all, despite all the twists and turns that the sect leader led them down. There had been more than a few occasions in the past where Shen Qingqiu had been able to sit back and watch the sect leader of Cang Qiong Mountain at work. He had a way of winding through conversation with imperceptible guile that made others trip on their own shoelaces.

It had taken Shen Qingqiu years to realize what the sect leader had been doing – he always had this soft big brother attitude that it just *seemed* like things worked out in their favor. It really wasn’t until he was on the other side of that polite, faux-unknowing smile that Shen Qingqiu realized it had always been a calculation from the start.

He hated being on the other side.

Not once during the “conversation” did Yue Qingyuan ever look at Shen Qingqiu.

He wondered if there would ever be a way to repair their relationship. He really liked Big Bro! The conversations that the two had shared over tea were never boring. Even when Yue Qingyuan was overbearing after the Immortal Conference, he still looked forward to their chats.

If he were sort of honest with himself… he would admit that Yue Qingyuan reminded him of his da-ge. The thought of losing *both* of them… well.

Shen Qingqiu decided now wasn’t the time to think about it.

Once excused, three of them stood and left with varying degrees of respectful goodbyes.

There were some stipulations to being *completely* accepted back into the sect; for starters, the three of them had to agree to go along with the plan and that meant that they were under house arrest.

Not that Yue Qingyuan phrased it that way. He made some impassioned sentiment about giving all three of them time to recover before being bombarded with their martial family, and giving Liu Qingge time to adjust and heal before running off on missions.

But it was a house arrest.

A disciple in Qian Cao robes guided the three of them through the halls that Shen Qingqiu now understood were underground tunnels and secret passageways. He suspected that this was the same exact route that they had taken Tianlang-Jun to his lodgings.

Nervously, Shen Qingqiu hoped that they would not be situated too close to the former(?) heavenly demon. He had a feeling that if Luo Binghe and him were to run into another again that there wouldn't be a mountain left to house them.

(No. He wasn't going to think about what might have encouraged the protagonist's ire. Nope!)

There was also a long list of non-punishments. For example, once everything settled down, both Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu had to return to work. That included tending meetings, managing their peaks, and… doing everything they did before this whole shit show happened.

Oh. The horror.

It all essentially seemed like one big contract that begged both Liu Qingge and Shen Qingqiu not to just fuck off and leave the sect in the dust.

(Not that there weren't some requirements threaded in there to prevent Luo Binghe from completely destroying the sect or betraying them, but those were to be expected.)

"Everything will work out," Liu Qingge spoke up suddenly.

Shen Qingqiu realized that they were outside. Sharp mountain air nipped at his skin, and wind glided around them. He turned his attention to the sky, where the sun had nestled into the horizon. Bright oranges and pinks drenched the world, brushing against a night sky so full of color that it knocked the breath from his lungs.

It had been so long since he had seen so many stars. He stared up at them and tried to pretend that his throat wasn't getting tight.

A hand pressed against the middle of his back. It centered him.

Shen Qingqiu breathed in through his nose. He flashed a calm smile to Luo Binghe, who stood next to him and watched him with eyes that were far too understanding. He supposed

that both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe were probably relieved that they wouldn't have to take care of him so much now! They wouldn't have to worry about what he could or couldn't eat, nor would they have to worry about his stamina throughout the day.

Or his pain.

Or… him dying.

Because he wasn't going to die anymore.

He…

"Shizun?" Luo Binghe asked in a voice that was too tender.

Something stung Shen Qingqiu's eyes. He blinked a few times, trying to clear it away. His throat was tight, and the tip of his nose burned. "This master hopes that they at least thought to deliver some books."

Liu Qingge turned to him. His face melted with his own soft expression. He stepped up to them, lifting a hand to clean up underneath Shen Qingqiu's eye. "Come on." He turned back onto a stone pathway.

At the entrance to a large guest house, the Qian Cao disciple waited with their head politely pointed away. The three of them were let inside, where a large care package sat ready for them. The disciple gently reminded them to stay within residence, and should they need anything to light a talisman.

Anything they request will be delivered posthaste.

The residence was magnificent. Tall ceilings, intricate lattice work above breathtaking archways, deep-toned woods intersected with lacquered accents. Shen Qingqiu wondered, humorously, if the sect leader thought to give them such a large space to prevent the Bai Zhan War God from feeling trapped.

It wouldn't work, of course. Eventually Liu Qingge would grow antsy.

Before they could explore much more, Shen Qingqiu realized that they had a guest.

At the doorway, both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe were pawing through the care package. It was made up of a few crates. Liu Qingge moved aside a bundle of fabric and stated, "There's books."

Shen Qingqiu smiled at the guest, who had left her seat to drift to the entryway. She held a hand to her chest, eyes shining. Her veil hid the rest of her expression, but it wasn't difficult to tell the blatant *relief* that melted over her.

When he didn't get a response, Liu Qingge glanced up. The books clattered to the floor. Voice thick and breaking, he choked, "*Mingyan."* He launched over the crates and threw himself at her.

A surprised breath escaped Liu Mingyan as she caught her brother. Both stumbled a few feet back. She let out a shaky exhale, tears wetting her lashes. “Ge.” Her face burrowed into Liu Qingge’s shoulder. She dug her fingers into his robes, knuckles going white.

It had only been two months for them.

For her, it had been six.

Shen Qingqiu turned away from the reunion. He stepped over to Luo Binghe and asked quietly, “Did they leave you some ingredients?”

“They did, Shizun,” Luo Binghe answered. His eyes were on the siblings. He had his own tears that he very quietly was trying to hold back.

With a smile, Shen Qingqiu cupped his cheek and ran a thumb underneath his eye. He wished that he could give both the Lius a little more privacy; with the System still down, they could not go far from each other.

When Shen Qingqiu threw a curious glance over his shoulder, Liu Qingge was holding onto Liu Mingyan’s face and pressing their foreheads together. Both of their eyes were squeezed shut. The expression on Liu Qingge’s face…

Shen Qingqiu suspected it was much like his own when he had seen his sister in the hospital that first time. At that point, he hadn’t let himself expect to see her. He had carefully tucked the loneliness and homesickness away and instead focused on the issue at hand. It… was difficult watching their reunion. He turned away from them, ignoring the itch in his eyes as he began to organize the care package.

Wordlessly, Luo Binghe reached out and took his hand. He threaded their fingers together and squeezed. Tears slid down his face.

Ah… Luo Binghe had made a friend with Shen Huiying, hadn’t he? He must be realizing that he wouldn’t get to see her again, either.

Shen Qingqiu squeezed his hand in turn, holding back from guiding his disciple into his arms. It wouldn’t be very proper; not with Liu Mingyan standing just a few feet away from them.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe whispered.

Being back in this world was a second chance. It was more than Shen Yuan had ever even thought to hope for. How would he have ever known that he would be born anew, in a place where he was surrounded by people who loved and supported him? In a body that was strong? In a world full of fantastical beasts and places that he could find and explore?

With two people who would never leave his side?

It was sad saying goodbye. But Shen Yuan had always been prepared to say goodbye. And now he had forever to look forward to.

“Yuan. Binghe,” Liu Qingge said, breaking the silence. His expression was normal and stern, though now Shen Qingqiu was able to spot the hidden smile in the corner of his lips. The war god’s eyes glittered. He turned, arm around his sister, and said, “This is my sister. Mingyan.”

Then Liu Qingge *beamed.*

His eyes disappeared, his teeth flashed, and he *grinned.* It changed his entire face, making him boyish and unrestrained.

Absolutely beautiful.

Shen Qingqiu rose to his feet and swept wrinkles out of his robes. He could not help that his own lips were copying Liu Qingge’s, his excitement infectious. He greeted Liu Mingyan respectfully, and Luo Binghe copied him at his elbow.

Neither mentioned that they had met her before.

This moment was *different.* This moment was Liu Qingge sharing a piece of his heart with them. This woman was someone he cared for, someone he had raised, someone who he *wanted* to be a part of their lives.

Liu Mingyan greeted them respectfully, though her eyes kept flickering between all three of them. There was a surprised lift in her brow.

“Would Liu-shizhi like to join us for dinner?” Shen Qingqiu asked. “This master suspects that your shizun knows your whereabouts?”

There was only one way that Liu Mingyan would have known that she could meet her brother here – if Qi Qingqi had known that the three of them were going to be woken today. Either she had Yue Qingyuan’s blessing or she had slipped in on her own. Considering that she had been waiting for them out of view, Shen Qingqiu suspected that meeting with her tonight might not have been completely above board.

“Yes, Shen-shibo,” Liu Mingyan said with the epitome of grace and respect. She dipped her head to him. “If it is alright, this one will burden the three of you tonight.”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge said with a nod. He glanced at Luo Binghe. “You will make her dinner.”

“Of course, Ming-gege,” Luo Binghe fluttered his lashes.

Shocked, Liu Mingyan threw a wide-eyed glance at her brother.

A deep, red blush conquered every inch of skin on Liu Qingge’s face. He dropped his sister and lunged forward, “*Brat!”*

Shen Qingqiu stood aside, using his fan to cover his laugh. He tried to keep it out of his voice as he sternly said, “Binghe. Show more respect for your shishu.”

The two crashed to the floor in a tangle of limbs. With Liu Qingge’s current condition, there was no way he was up to par. Still, somehow Luo Binghe ended up in a chokehold with the

war god berating him.

Liu Mingyan watched the exchange with her eyes alight and questioning.

Clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu smoothed out his expression and quietly explained, “The three of us… shared a dream realm during our absence. We spent some time getting to know each other.”

Eyes widening, Liu Mingyan turned to stare at Shen Qingqiu. Her eyebrows pressed together, as if she were biting back a question.

“Shishu, this Binghe is sorry!” Luo Binghe cried. “He will be respectful to his gege!”

“*Luo. Binghe!”*

Liu Mingyan let out a soft breath that might have been a laugh.

“It may… take some time before dinner is prepared,” Shen Qingqiu said, apologetically.

Eyes curved with her delight, Liu Mingyan shook her head. “This one is patient, Shen-shibo. Besides… it appears as if my brother is… having fun.”

Not too many people may have agreed with that. The war god was red with his mortified wrath, while Luo Binghe was holding back a mischievous grin. Out of the two, only one appeared to be having fun.

Shen Qingqiu agreed with Liu Mingyan. While his shishu *did* appear angry, it wasn’t true anger. It was playful and full of life. Even as he shouted, “*Drills!* Told you, *drills!* Until you collapse!”

“Shishu! Shishu no!” Luo Binghe cried.

“Can it at least wait until after dinner?” Shen Qingqiu asked.

“*No!!”*

Unfortunately for Liu Qingge and his revenge, the punishment *would* wait until after dinner. It would wait for a lot longer than all three of them had anticipated.

Once things had calmed, Shen Qingqiu found himself ambling around the kitchen. He thought of putting together some tea, only to realize that their tea selection was hidden inside one of the food crates that Luo Binghe was currently digging through.

Liu Qingge methodically placed items away on shelves, and peered into cabinets for an inventory.

Somewhere around the large residence, Liu Mingyan was helping them place other pieces of their care package away. She had insisted, since the three of them could not really separate from one another and she could at least bring crates to their respective rooms.

Luo Binghe drew back with a gasp. He twisted around and said, “Shizun!”

“Yes, Binghe?”

“Shizun can eat anything!” The prospect seemed to truly excite Luo Binghe. His eyes lit up like fireworks.

Amused, Shen Qingqiu opened his fan and quietly said, “Well… within reason, of course. There are some items that are poisonous to humans-”

“*Shizun,”* Luo Binghe whined.

He had gotten bold to interrupt Shen Qingqiu. Still, he laughed quietly all the same. When his disciple threw a rather pathetic pout his way, he stepped over and patted his head consolingly. “This master understands. Yes. Binghe can prepare whatever he likes.”

“Mn!”

Pausing his inspection, Liu Qingge frowned over his shoulder. “Within reason.”

“Shishu…” Luo Binghe sighed.

Liu Qingge threw him a sharp glance. The look said everything he didn’t: the three of them had a large meal relatively recently, and his sister wasn’t going to eat that much. There was no need to cook in excess and allow food to go to waste, especially since Luo Binghe was often offended by leftovers.

(Leftovers were a favorite of Shen Yuan’s, unfortunately for a certain dramatic little half-demon. The amount of times Luo Binghe caught him at the fridge, stealing a bite of something straight from the container, were quite numerous. So were the amount of times where Luo Binghe had thrown a dramatic tantrum.

Sometimes cold noodles just hit right, alright!?)

“No more fridge,” Liu Qingge reminded him as he turned back to a cabinet.

Shen Qingqiu sighed wistfully.

That did exactly as he intended – out of the corner of his eye, he saw Luo Binghe throw him an offended frown.

“...this Binghe will prepare a meal within reason,” he grumbled as he turned back to the supplies.

“This master supposes we *do* have cold boxes,” Shen Qingqiu thought aloud.

Luo Binghe paused and threw a glance his way.

Keeping his face passive, Shen Qingqiu raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Binghe?”

With his back turned to Luo Binghe, Liu Qingge was free to smirk. He added, “Talismans work, too.”

Sharp, dark eyes flitted over to Liu Qingge. He narrowed his gaze, trying to decide if the two of them were purposely messing with him.

(They were.)

“Ah… this master hasn’t had leftovers with talismans in *quite* some time…” Shen Qingqiu said, reminiscing.

Liu Qingge turned his head just enough to flash an impish smile.

A fan had hidden the lower half of Shen Qingqiu’s face, obscuring his own smirk. He turned it just enough for his shidi to see it. The act caught the war god for a moment. His smile faded, though the warmth stayed. It lingered in his eyes and grew heated.

Over these past few months of living in close quarters with his shidi, Shen Qingqiu has come to realize a few things. The first: Liu Qingge wasn’t a *rash* person, just decisive. If he didn’t have everything he needed to make a decision, he was more than willing to take a step back and observe until he did.

The man had severe control over his inhibitions. He rarely indulged in sweets, he was regimented in his exercise, and even took care to clean up after himself. Shen Yuan had started to see where the man *let go.* It was easier to see when he saw it from the outside, where Liu Qingge would pass by Luo Binghe and his hand would twitch. He would take a few steps, pause, and turn around.

Then he would catch Luo Binghe, wrap him up in a tight hold, and dip him in a kiss.

Luo Binghe had always melted, brimming with happiness.

As the days passed, Liu Qingge’s restraint loosened more and more. There were far less occasions where he paused, and far more when he would automatically just reach out and steal affection where it was easily given.

Shen Qingqiu recognized that look in his shidi’s eyes now. He thought nothing of it, as the war god crossed over to him and captured him in a strong hold. His protests were all perfunctory. He felt his skin warm, but he lowered his fan and sank into his shidi’s searing kiss.

It was the first time any of them had kissed like this – in this world. For Shen Yuan, it was odd. A new body with new reactions and feelings. He hadn’t expected to feel goosebumps across his back or the zing of anticipation that danced down his spine. Habit made him want to push up onto his tip toes to chase Liu Qingge’s mouth – though both were closer in height and there was no need.

A hand clamped down on his lower spine, and his stomach tightened.

Oh. Shen Qingqiu realized with a start that *everything* felt different in *this* body. He wondered which parts of him would be sensitive, and he *ached* to feel both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe explore and figure that out for themselves.

Teeth dragged along Shen Qingqiu's lower lip and his knees weakened. He found the edge of the counter with his backside and was pressed against it, Liu Qingge's leg sliding between his thighs.

Shen Qingqiu's head fell back. His jaw clenched. Fingers knotting into Liu Qingge's borrowed robes, he let out a shuddering breath. A few epiphanies layered one over the other, each adding a layer of condensing and thrilling heat. The three of them would have to "fix the System" at some point.

He had *energy.*

He had a *lot* of energy.

Lots of energy with little to no pain.

To say he was *eager* would be an understatement.

All they had to do was make it through dinner-

"Liu-shimei," Luo Binghe called loudly and respectfully, "you're back."

It took Liu Qingge a few moments to parse what Luo Binghe said.

Shen Qingqiu, on the other hand, understood immediately. He slammed his hands into his shidi's chest.

Both were surprised when Liu Qingge went flying backwards. That was a miscalculation on Shen Qingqiu's part. First, he forgot he was *a cultivator.* Secondly, Liu Qingge was still weakened from his atrophied muscles. He managed to catch himself, face contorting with confusion and betrayal.

Then Liu Mingyan cleared her throat.

Liu Qingge's entire face reddened.

Throwing his fan in front of his face, Shen Qingqiu whirled around and pretended to be absorbed into searching the cabinets. He was horrified. Earlier that day had been Tianlang-Jun, and *now,* in front of his *sister*-

"Tea!" Liu Qingge shouted.

Shen Qingqiu cringed and wondered if it would be more embarrassing to crawl into one of the cabinets and close the door behind him. He might choose to never come out.

“Liu-shishu,” Luo Binghe said in a too-even tone. “The tea is right here.”

There was a furious sound of stomping feet and swishing silk.

A kettle was thrown onto the counter.

Shen Qingqiu stared down a particularly darkened corner of a cabinet and sulkily realized that he was far too large now to even think of fitting.

Eventually, the four of them made it to the dinner table. In between then and the incident in the kitchen, Liu Mingyan flowed through polite conversation with Luo Binghe. There were far more moments of companionable silence, interrupted only sometimes with looks shared between the Liu siblings.

Shen Qingqiu might have attempted to string together more polite conversation, if he hadn’t been so mortified at being caught by Liu Mingyan. By the time they each sat down to eat, he was at least calmed down enough to lower his fan and dive into the meal.

It was luxurious; a spread that would have been accompanied with a camera-pan and complimentary sparkles as a big S+++ slammed onto the screen. Steam rose off freshly cooked fish, which had crisp and golden skin. Perfectly rounded mounds of rice sat in small bowls. Various vegetables waited to be dipped into the chosen offerings of carefully curated sauces. Shen Qingqiu really hadn’t been too hungry after the meal they had earlier, but once his eyes caught sight of the food his stomach had quickly agreed with him that it was empty.

Conversation at the table wasn’t as awkward as Shen Qingqiu thought it might be. He even jumped in a time or two, and was met by the squished eyes of a smile from Liu Mingyan and Liu Qingge’s own delighted glance every time the two interacted.

Partway through the meal, Liu Qingge started grilling his sister on her cultivation and her training. Once the questions started, she sat up as straight as a rod and dutifully recounted nighthunts and cultivation breakthroughs. She was unafraid to even point out mistakes and drawbacks.

Liu Qingge only nodded, and waited for her to explain her plan to overcome them. Sometimes he added in a word or two of his own thoughts on the matter. Most of the time, he deemed it unnecessary. His silence was a compliment in itself; he knew and trusted his sister to resolve the problems herself, and also knew she would ask if she needed help.

As the meal neared its end, Liu Mingyan set her chopsticks aside. She glanced over at her brother and said, “You’re happy.”

It wasn’t a question. Liu Qingge dipped his head and unashamedly admitted, “Mn.”

Liu Mingyan’s eyes disappeared into her smile. Even with the veil, it was easy to tell that she was grinning. She said, “Good.”

At the door to their borrowed home, Liu Qingge bid farewell to his sister. They lingered at the doorway, exchanging nothing but silence. They were just happy to be in another's presence. In an attempt to give them some semblance of privacy, Shen Qingqiu and Luo Binghe waited around the corner.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe said, quietly.

Shen Qingqiu drew his full attention to the protagonist and raised his eyebrows in a questioning manner. It was odd to nearly see his disciple eye to eye. He had grown so used to rolling his head back and craning his neck.

Dark eyes glinted with the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of Luo Binghe's lips. "...this disciple thinks we should wait before dealing with the System."

A flush of heat rose through Shen Qingqiu. His eyes darted aside and he flicked open his fan – oh, how he'd missed his fan! He did not have the face to press his disciple for *more* of an explanation on that topic.

He swallowed down a tinge of disappointment.

Eyes gliding down Shen Qingqiu's body, Luo Binghe leaned in. His arm rested above Shen Qingqiu's head as his lips brushed across his temple. "...but that doesn't mean that this disciple thinks that we can't still-"

"*Binghe,"* Shen Qingqiu snapped. He pressed a hand against the half-demon's chest and pushed against him. He felt the rapid tempo of Luo Binghe's heart against his fingertips.

Luo Binghe watched him with large, dark eyes. Tears began to bloom in those dark depths. "Shizun… this disciple missed you."

"What could you possibly mean?" Shen Qingqiu sneered. He didn't know why he asked – he *knew.* Another man had kissed him earlier, and while the protagonist was different from the original in many ways, he suspected possessiveness existed in both versions of him.

Pressing their bodies together, Luo Binghe nosed his hair. "Shizun…" He whispered against his skin, lips tickling his forehead. He dropped his voice in a desperate, heartbroken whine. "Shizun. Do you truly wish this Binghe to go away?"

Eyes falling shut, Shen Qingqiu felt how much Luo Binghe "missed him" through layers of fabric. He whacked Luo Binghe's shoulder with the fan and snapped, "Shameless! Liu-shizhi is *at the door-"*

"No," Liu Qingge said. He leaned against the wall, watching them both. The heat of his eyes traced down the length of their bodies. He didn't have to say, *"Keep going."* His face said it for him.

Luo Binghe had a sharp, excited smile for a moment before he pulled back on his pathetic tears. "Did Shizun not miss this Binghe…?" He rolled their hips together.

Startling sparks ignited up Shen Qingqiu's spine. He managed to stop a gasp, head turning to the side. His skin was tight and burning. "B-Binghe!" His hands on Luo Binghe's chest, which first were to push him away, now clutched onto his robes.

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe whispered against his temple. A kiss pressed against his skin, and traced down his cheek. "Shizun… this Binghe hasn't been able to taste you like this."

"S-Stop…" Shen Qingqiu swallowed. His bones weakened. Even as he begged for Luo Binghe to stop, he drew him in closer. "Sh-Shameless, Binghe…!"

Luo Binghe burrowed his nose underneath Shen Qingqiu's chin and breathed him in. Wet heat drew up from Shen Qingqiu's collarbone to his earlobe as the half-demon licked him. A shuddering, disbelieving breath escaped Luo Binghe and he whined, "*Shizun…"*

Tingles worked their way up his thighs. Shen Qingqiu rolled his head back and closed his eyes. His entire body *ached.* He needed there to be less layers between them. Needed someone to be buried inside of him. His scalp prickled.

"Binghe." Liu Qingge shifted on his feet, rolling his shoulders. "Let's bathe Qingqiu."

Luo Binghe stopped. His nose was still buried against Shen Qingqiu's skin. Then he hummed, pleased with the proffered idea.

"What do you *mean,"* Shen Qingqiu snapped, "'bathe *Qingqiu?'"*

"Shishu and this one will bathe too," Luo Binghe consoled. There was a simmering, dark heat of promise in his eyes as he reluctantly drew back. He assessingly tugged on Shen Qingqiu's lapels, as if considering divesting him of his robes right then and there.

As *if* Shen Qingqiu would allow that! They were in the entryway! He smacked his disciple's hands away and turned his cheek. Straightening out his robes, he stepped away from the wall and started to walk to their bedroom.

"Why wait?" Liu Qingge asked.

At first, Shen Qingqiu thought that his shidi had been infected by Luo Binghe's shamelessness.

Before he received an answer, the war god continued, "You think it will fight."

He was asking about what Luo Binghe had said earlier – that they should wait before fixing the System.

"This Binghe thinks it best to launch an attack directly after… healing it," he explained.

Liu Qingge grunted his approval. By attacking it right after it was fixed, the System would have less time to prepare itself. It might be weakened.

"Mm." Shen Qingqiu tapped his chin with his fan. He asked, "...*must* we exorcize it?"

“Yes,” both of the two stubborn fools said at the same time.

A twinge of anxiety sprung in Shen Qingqiu. He couldn’t put his finger on why, exactly. The System had metered out punishments and forced Luo Binghe into the Abyss, but…

He shook his head. There was no use in trying to argue a point he didn’t exactly understand himself. He ignored the wiggling, uncertain feeling that worked its way around his stomach and instead said, “You would prefer to wait until Qingge is fully recovered.”

Shen Qingqiu tried not to be disappointed about that.

He… wasn’t!

Luo Binghe flashed him a wide, too-knowing smile, “Shizun, don’t worry. This Binghe has other plans until then.”

Heat rose into Shen Qingqiu’s cheeks and he hid behind his fan. “This master has no idea what his unruly disciple is alluding to.”

Liu Qingge snorted behind him.

“That’s alright, Shizun,” Luo Binghe said with a mischievous grin. “We’ll show you.”

Chapter End Notes

As a fair warning to everyone, the next chapter is going to unapologetically be smut. For those of you uninterested, there will be a chapter summary at the end.

(I have a feeling we're going to break the 13k smut chapter from before...)

also... for anyone curious - sometimes I give updates about the fic on tumblr! specifically, my sideblog crycifer.

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

11.5k estimated reading time 38 min

Hello everyone! Thank you so much for your patience 🙏 I couldn't keep the plot from this chapter, and I ended up having to split it because... it's a monster.

If you're not interested in any spicy scenes, I'll write a summary of what happens below. But also I have added in little "SKIP" links that will scroll past explicit scenes. As a fair warning, the entire chapter is heavily suggestive. If you rather read past all of that, I suggest starting here.

Content warning: unreliable narrator, identity issues, blow jobs, hand jobs, mentions of fingering, light dom/sub play, light masochism, there's a bite that draws blood and the person who receives that bite thoroughly likes it, father and son issues, classic LBH manipulation tactics

If I've missed anything that you think should be tagged, let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Whoever prepared their borrowed home had done so with polite ignorance – they had prepared three beds. There were also three rooms designated for them, should they resolve the curse and need their separate spaces. Each room was equal in size and ornamentation; showing the near equivalent status of the three men that would be utilizing the space until further notice.

Luo Binghe took one look at the three separate beds and scoffed.

Both he and Liu Qingge immediately got to work correcting that error.

Shen Qingqiu turned his attention to their belongings and began a half-hearted attempt at putting them away. He wasn't sure if he should be embarrassed or not that Liu Mingyan knew to place all their items together. In the end, he reasoned with himself that she knew that the three of them couldn't separate.

By the time Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe finished maneuvering the furniture, Shen Qingqiu's skin was prickling with anticipation. He stared out of the window into a private courtyard, his fingers playing with the tassel at the end of his fan.

Someone stepped up behind him and put a palm on his hip, drawing him in close. A nose nudged along the collar of his robes and breathed in greedily.

“Binghe,” Shen Qingqiu tutted, absentmindedly. Then he asked, “Is it time?”

“Mm…” Luo Binghe wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him in closer until their bodies were flushed. “Shizun…” He murmured against his skin.

“Has this master failed in teaching his disciple anything?” Shen Qingqiu grumbled, embarrassed. “Does he only know ‘Shizun?’”

“Shishu, too,” Liu Qingge added, helpfully.

Luo Binghe’s hands tightened. He let out a bullied sound, burrowing his face into the back of Shen Qingqiu’s shoulder. “Shizun and Shishu are so mean to this Binghe…” Even as he whined and complained, his tactful fingers tugged at the sash around Shen Qingqiu’s middle.

A surprised sound sneaked out of Shen Qingqiu’s lips. He caught Luo Binghe’s wrist and scolded, “Binghe! *Not in front of the window!”*

Snorting, Liu Qingge shifted on his feet. “Binghe. Bring him here.”

With a delighted hum, Luo Binghe did as asked. He guided Shen Qingqiu across the room.

Embarrassed, Shen Qingqiu protested along the way. He drew quiet when they reached Liu Qingge, who guided them into the bathroom where water was already waiting for them in a large tub. He waved a careless hand and a burst of qi shot into the water. It began steaming. His eyes never left Shen Qingqiu, dark and heady. [SKIP]

Luo Binghe slid his hands up and down Shen Qingqiu’s sides, pressing kisses along the side of his neck. “Shizun.”

Oh, Shen Qingqiu’s eyes fell shut, his skin heating. *We’re doing this.* His toes curled and he tried to keep his expression passive.

Hands caught his face and tilted his head back. He lost himself to the sensation of calloused fingers trailing along his jaw. Soft lips kissed his eyelids and his nose. By the time they reached his mouth, his own lips were tingling with anticipation. Goosebumps drew down his skin.

His outer robe was extracted. The loss of it made his breath catch.

A tongue slid against his lower lip. When he opened his mouth, Liu Qingge didn’t take the obvious invitation. He continued to pepper soft kisses against the corners of his mouth and tease his lower lip between his teeth.

Shen Qingqiu tried to control his breathing, to keep it even and unbothered.

He was failing.

Meticulous fingers drew down along the seam of his robes. His sash had long since disappeared to wherever his outer robe had been placed. One after the other, ties keeping his

robes together loosened. He felt the heat of Luo Binghe behind him, who placed devoted kisses along his shoulders and loosening neckline.

Layer after layer escaped. The heat of the bodies on either side of him only became more overwhelming.

The kisses stopped.

There was a single layer left on Shen Qingqiu. He had never felt so sensitive, so keen, to the sensations of his body. He dared to crack his eyes open and almost regretted it, with the hungry way Liu Qingge looked him up and down.

Luo Binghe's hands glided up his arms and squeezed his shoulders.

Reverently, Liu Qingge tugged the last tie on Shen Qingqiu's robes. Silk fell apart. Shen Qingqiu squeezed his eyes shut and turned his head. His body had already been reacting to their administrations. He felt the familiar and unfamiliar sensation of blood flooding into his cock. The moist air breathed against his skin and he shivered.

Luo Binghe groaned into his bare shoulder and whined, "*Shizun…"*

Shen Qingqiu swallowed too loudly. His breath caught. "This… this can't… be your plans for the entire night," he protested.

"It is." Liu Qingge stole the last piece of fabric from him and tossed it aside. His steady hands rested on Shen Qingqiu's hips and kneaded up his sides.

Behind him, Luo Binghe pressed close. The silks of his robes against Shen Qingqiu's bare skin made him lose his breath. He found himself falling back into the protagonist's arms as Liu Qingge mapped a trail down his neck and chest with his lips.

Shen Qingqiu clenched his jaw. He reached back and caught onto the only thing that could ground him: Luo Binghe's hair and robes. Each breath was getting shakier, and he was slowly losing control.

As Liu Qingge's mouth found one of his nipples, Luo Binghe's hand found the other.

The sensation was startling enough to make Shen Qingqiu groan. His knees weakened as a jolt of pleasure rushed through him. It was different than it was in his own body; there, the sensation was sharp and quick. This was a rippling, tingling effect that crawled up through his veins. His cock throbbed.

Fuck, Shen Qingqiu clenched his jaw, flustered at that noises that begged to escape his lips. He breathed out into Luo Binghe's neck. His legs felt moments away from giving out. Teeth grazed his shoulder then bit down.

The noise that burst from his lips was mortifying.

Liu Qingge moaned against his chest, the heat of his breath dancing across his moistened nipple.

“Sh-Shizun…” Luo Binghe growled, teeth still clamped down around skin.

Both of them could bruise him now. They could squeeze and push him to limits he didn’t have before. His entire body buzzed with anticipation and want and need, and it was almost overwhelming.

The only thing keeping him tethered was the fact that he trusted them. Even as they stripped him of every single wall and mask, leaving him vulnerable and wanting with no cover, he trusted them to see him and…

And to *love* him for it.

That didn’t make it any less embarrassing.

Liu Qingge shifted forward and the front of his robe grazed across the tip of Shen Qingqiu’s cock.

A moan hitched from the back of his throat and his hips bucked.

Fuck! Shen Qingqiu broke. He started panting. His knees quivered. The only thing holding him up was the solid foundation of Luo Binghe behind him, one hand bruising his hip.

“Fuck,” Liu Qingge breathed, shakily.

“Shizun…” Luo Binghe murmured. He kissed the bite mark. “You’re going to make Shishu a mess before we can get you cleaned…”

Breathing heavily, Shen Qingqiu hid his face. “Shut up,” he pleaded, voice weak. “W-What… what happened to bathing? What… what is this?” He tried to sound admonishing and stern. He sounded pathetic and wanting instead.

He couldn’t open his eyes and see their faces.

“Shizun… we haven’t seen you like this,” Luo Binghe said with a pout in his voice. One arm clamped around his chest and drew him against his body. The other hand glided down his side and teased circles through the thatch of hair above Shen Qingqiu’s groin. “Shizun has changed so much… we’ve stayed the same. Isn’t it only fair?”

“N-Not true,” Shen Qingqiu said through gritted teeth. He wished he had more eloquence but the hand that pressed against his lower stomach was frying his mind. One of Luo Binghe’s fingers traced around the base of his cock.

This was entirely unfair.

“B-Binghe…” Shen Qingqiu groaned. His body couldn’t decide if he should grind back into the hardened heat pressing into his backside, or if he should chase the teasing hand that refused to give him any real relief. He hated that he was panting. He dared to open his eyes and regretted, again, because Liu Qingge was staring at the two of them with pupils so blown out that they nearly stole all the color from his iris. Eyes snapping shut, he managed to choke out, “B-Binghe is hiding his demonic features.”

Luo Binghe drew to a cautionary stillness.

Finding an escape, Shen Qingqiu latched onto it and continued, “Binghe doesn’t need to hide here.” He found strength in his legs and slipped away. Taking two steps back, he wasn’t sure if it was any better than before. Now he didn’t know what to do with his hands, and he was painfully hard and *completely* naked between two unbelievably handsome men. He settled with reaching up to undo his hair.

That… was another mistake because both Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge turned their attention back onto him, staring at him hungrily.

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge said, tugging his eyes back to the half-demon. “Show me.”

Luo Binghe ducked his chin.

“He saw before,” Shen Qingqiu reasoned. Without their hands on him, he was slowly regaining at least some of his thoughts. His hair spilled out over his shoulders and tickled down his bare back.

“...this Binghe…” Luo Binghe started.

Rolling his eyes, Liu Qingge caught him by the front of his robes and hauled him closer for a fierce kiss. He gnawed harshly at Luo Binghe’s mouth, tugging at his hair. “Idiot,” he growled. “Come on.”

With a weakened breath, Luo Binghe returned his kiss. As he did, his zuiyin glowed on his forehead. His ears sharpened, and dark, thick nails came to dangerous points at the tips of his fingers.

Liu Qingge groaned, pleased, as fangs caught onto his lower lip. “There.” He opened his eyes and added with a little smirk, “Good boy.”

“Shishu,” Luo Binghe growled. He pressed forward urgently, and fervently tore off Liu Qingge’s robes.

The kissing turned into more of a tussle, with each of them trying to lead and guide the kiss. Their robes weren’t entirely salvable by the time the fabric hit the ground. Luo Binghe slammed Liu Qingge into the side of the tub and bit at the junction between his neck and shoulder.

Liu Qingge let out a gratified groan, his hand reaching down to squeeze his length.

The palms of Shen Qingqiu’s hands tingled. He wanted to follow that motion on himself, to squeeze some of the ache from his needy cock. His jaw tightened and he dropped his gaze from the two of them, shifting uneasily on his feet.

One of Luo Binghe’s hands caught Liu Qingge’s knee and he hoisted his leg around his waist. He pressed their hips together and ground against him.

Liu Qingge loosened with a moan, dangerously close to tipping over into the hot water. His arms wrapped tight around Luo Binghe's shoulders, and one of his hands dug firmly into his curls.

"Sh-Shishu," Luo Binghe whined, "Shishu, Shishu… *Shishu,* you feel so good." His clawed hands dug into the meat of Liu Qingge's thighs and dragged over his skin. He left reddened lines in the wake of his rough treatment.

"*Fuck,"* Liu Qingge shouted. His other leg clamped down around Luo Binghe and he reached down to wrap a hand around both of their cocks.

Shen Qingiqu had both of his hands over his face, peering between his fingers. He turned his head away, partially, but was unable to fully tear his eyes away. He bit down on his lip to stop an involuntary sound from leaving him.

"Binghe," Liu Qingge panted, harshly tugging on his hair. His hand worked both of them, his hips stuttering into rhythm. "*Binghe."*

"Sh-Shishu!" Luo Binghe cried. He started marking the war god's skin with his mouth. Biting pale flesh and abusing it with bruises and teeth marks. In between each new mark he said, "Shizun is watching us, Shishu. He loves watching us. He's so hard for us right now-"

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu choked, horrified.

"He's watching your hand, the way you're tightening around both of us," Luo Binghe continued. "His cock is dripping almost as much as yours is, Shishu…"

"You and your fucking mouth!" Liu Qingge shouted. His head fell back, his wrist working faster.

Luo Binghe wasn't helping him, too focused on sucking bruises and dragging his claws across his back and thighs. "Shishu is dripping so much, we almost don't need any oil, Shizun. See how pretty his cock is, Shizun?"

"Binghe…" Shen Qingqiu was embarrassed at how his voice cracked. His eyes were following the harsh, quick motion of Liu Qingge's wrist.

He had seen the two of them get another off plenty of times by now. It did not stop his body from reacting. His entire being was throbbing.

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe whined. "Shizun should touch himself."

A lightning jolt surged through Shen Qingqiu's body.

Two pairs of eyes drew towards him, watching him hungrily.

His mouth dried.

"Mn," Liu Qingge murmured, his eyes hazy. "Qingqiu."

It… was too much. With that address, Shen Yuan finally realized why. “Fuck,” he choked out under his breath.

There was a strange disconnect in his brain. He had easily adopted the role of “Shen Qingqiu” once more, like sliding back into an old pair of shoes that he hadn’t worn for a few months. He could play the part of Qing Jing peak lord again in front of the others.

But… What did it mean to be Shen Qingqiu, who was in love with Luo Binghe and Liu Qingge?

He didn’t even know where to start. Donning on that mask again, after not wearing it for so long in front of these two…

He didn’t want to.

But he also didn’t want to disappoint them by not being who they expected him to be.

What if they *wanted* Shen Qingqiu back?

Who *was* Shen Qingqiu?

It was one thing to be playing a role. Except now there wasn’t any role to play; the story was turned on its head. Proud Immortal Demon Way did not *need* a scum villain any longer.

What… *Who* was Shen Yuan supposed to be now?

Liu Qingge drew to a stop. Sweat glistened on his skin. The desperation in his eyes faded into something softer. He held out a hand. “A-Yuan. Here.”

There was a strange need to apologize on Shen Yuan’s tongue. He was too frozen in his place to draw any nearer.

“A-Yuan.” Liu Qingge extracted himself from Luo Binghe. He moved with care, and left Luo Binghe with a kiss to ease their parting. He stepped carefully across the room to Shen Yuan and took his hand in his own. “We can stop.”

It wasn’t as if Shen Yuan *wanted* to stop, really. His body was still aching and he had liked watching the two of them. It wasn’t either of their faults that he was having a minor identity crisis. “It’s fine,” he said, airily as if he wasn’t sure why either of them stopped. He brushed past Liu Qingge, trying to pull on the haughty air of Shen Qingqiu.

Each motion felt too choreographed and stilted.

Luo Binghe was now watching him closely. His clever eyes were darting around both of them, and drawing up and down Shen Yuan. Eyebrows furrowing, he crossed his arms. “...is it… this Binghe’s appearance?”

Startled, Shen Yuan threw Luo Binghe an appalled look. “What? No! Binghe.” He frowned and walked over to him. “Binghe is Binghe.”

“Even when this Binghe is different than the one A-Yuan knew before?” Luo Binghe asked, eyes hazing with tears. He dropped his head. “This Binghe is a demon… he’s different.”

“Binghe,” Shen Yuan said sternly. He reached up and gently cupped his cheek. “No matter what, Binghe will always be Binghe. And… I’ll…” His voice shrank. “I’ll always care… about you. No matter what.”

“Mn,” Liu Qingge added. He had an almost smile on his lips, watching with a pleased and knowing smile.

“Even if… this Binghe is different than what A-Yuan expected?” Luo Binghe asked, leaning into his touch. “I’m not the Luo Binghe from the book.”

“No,” Shen Yuan said. “You’re not.” He cleaned up Luo Binghe’s tears with his thumb. “This version… is my favorite.”

Luo Binghe smiled. His entire face lit up, the tears only making his eyes sparkle. “A-Yuan isn’t disappointed?”

“No,” Shen Yuan said, shaking his head. “Never.”

“Mn.” Liu Qingge drew over to them and looped a loose arm around Shen Yuan’s waist. He leaned against him and pressed a kiss against his shoulder.

Eyes sharpening, Luo Binghe trapped one of Shen Yuan’s hands with his own and drew it towards his lips. He nipped at the tender skin of his inner wrists before placing a kiss there. “So even if this Binghe looks different and isn’t the Luo Binghe you thought him to be, you still love him?”

Flustered, Shen Yuan raised a cautious eyebrow. “...yes.”

Liu Qingge smiled against his skin.

“So.” Luo Binghe kissed the palm of his hand. “This Binghe will be A-Yuan’s Binghe, no matter what?”

“Mn,” Shen Yuan said with a nod. Then he paused. A rush of startled and flustered heat cascaded through him. His eyes narrowed. “Oh. You little brat.”

Luo Binghe tried to blink at him innocently. It was ruined by his grin. “Shizun… this Binghe has no idea-”

With a sneer, Shen Yuan cruelly pinched his cheek. “No? He doesn’t?” He was both embarrassed and… relieved that he didn’t have to explain himself. His eyes fell away and he dropped his hands. “...let’s just bathe now.”

“Is that *all* A-Yuan wants?” Luo Binghe asked with a sultry smile. He teased his fingers down Shen Yuan’s arms and set them on his hips. [SKIP]

Shen Yuan swallowed.

“Binghe,” Liu Qingge murmured. “Can I?”

Luo Binghe cast him a glance. His eyes darkened and he nodded.

With a pleased hum, Liu Qingge drew down to his knees.

Shen Yuan made the mistake of looking at him. His gut tightened as an inferno of want surged into his core.

There was little else more beautiful than Liu Qingge on his knees, naked and hard, with his eyes ravenously dragging between two cocks. His tongue wet his lips, and he placed a questioning hand on Shen Yuan’s hip. His steel gray eyes flicked up and caught his gaze. Whatever wordless answer he found there made the corner of his lip twitch, pleased. His pale skin pinked a delightful little blush. He drew a circle with his thumb on Shen Yuan’s skin.

It was as if he had punched the air from his lungs. Shen Yuan covered his face with his hand, yet was unable to tear his eyes away.

Humming contentedly, Liu Qingge leaned and pressed a kiss to the base of Shen Yuan’s cock. The previous “dilemma” had softened him. With that touch, he felt a surge of electric snaps that shot up his spine. His chest heaved.

Liu Qingge wrapped his mouth around the base, then drew a line up to the tip with his tongue. His other hand crawled up Luo Binghe’s thigh and caught the base of his weighty erection and squeezed.

A broken, desperate sound shuddered past Luo Binghe’s lips. He sank forward, head collapsing onto Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “S-Shishu,” he breathed. “Gege.”

Frowning, Liu Qingge teased his tongue around the head of Shen Yuan’s length. Sparks fell like a cascade through him, the muscles in his thighs twitching. He clenched his jaw and clung onto Luo Binghe as if that might help him from falling.

Liu Qingge turned, mouth sliding off Shen Yuan’s cock. The humid air teased his wet skin, but it at least gave him a moment to catch his breath. The war god turned and placed a kiss on the head of Luo Binghe’s thick length. His clench hand tightened mercilessly, and Luo Binghe moaned against Shen Yuan’s skin. The featherlight brush of his lips made Shen Yuan shiver.

With gentle tugs, Liu Qingge forced the two of them to step closer together. Not that Luo Binghe minded in the least. He wrapped his arms around Shen Yuan and dragged him in closer, pressing their chests together. He whined through his teeth and kissed him.

Sparks skittered across Shen Yuan. He reached up, catching the other’s jaw with his hand and guiding his head to tilt. Then he kissed him in turn.

The hand around his cock guided his hips forward before the tip of his erection slid against something hot and slick.

Luo Binghe groaned against his mouth.

Both broke the kiss to look down.

Liu Qingge had them both in hand, sliding the tips of their cocks together. He leaned forward and dragged his tongue around both, the tip sliding from one slit to the other.

A sharp, desperate sound rang in the air. It surprised Shen Yuan that it had come from his own lips. His knees shook and he clung onto Luo Binghe, half afraid he might fall. Tingling sensations spread from his toes and rained up his limbs.

The war god paused long enough to turn his attention to his face, amazement widening his eyes.

"Shizun…" Luo Binghe panted. "Shizun, you sound so pretty. Shizun. Make more noises for us." One of his hands slid between their chests and pinched a nipple.

There went his knees. Shocked, Shen Yuan collapsed forward and groaned. His face buried into Luo Binghe's shoulder as his cock slid against the burning slick skin. It was almost unbearable.

Oh.

This was going to be a *lot,* wasn't it?

His fingers dug into Luo Binghe's back. His hips bucked. Embarrassed, he hid his face in Luo Binghe's neck. He panted, trying to regain some sense of control.

"*Fuck,"* Liu Qingge muttered.

Shen Yuan barely had time to regain his footing before warm, slick heat wrapped around his cock. When he dared a glance down, he saw Liu Qingge suck and draw his mouth up Shen Yuan's length before licking down Luo Binghe's. When his mouth wasn't on one of them, he was drawing his hand up and down, using the slick of his own saliva and their precum to ease some of the harsh friction.

A loud, wanton sound sang from Luo Binghe's throat. He continued to tug and play with Shen Yuan's nipple, while dragging kisses up and down his neck.

In between kisses, he panted, "Gege looks so pretty on his knees, doesn't he, A-Yuan? Gege is so good with his mouth. His hands are so strong. This Binghe…" He broke with a gasp. "Ah! This… This Binghe… feels his A-Yuan against… him. It feels so good, you-"

"Shut him *up!"* Liu Qingge snapped.

Shen Yuan wasn't quite sure how he might be able to manage that. His mind was a buzzing mess, and he couldn't think past the effort it took to keep standing and staying still. He kept catching his hips rolling forward, and ended up with abortive motions that both humiliated him and left him wanting.

Each shift forward let his cock slide against Luo Binghe's. It wasn't *quite* enough to bring him over the edge, but with Luo Binghe's hands squeezing and teasing his chest – while he

also moaned in his ear – he was dangerously close.

He couldn't look at Liu Qingge – not if he didn't want to finish embarrassingly early. But he also couldn't tear his eyes away.

Luo Binghe was right.

The man was *gorgeous* on his knees, focused on their members. He wrapped his lips as much as he could around the head of both of their cocks, hazy eyes flickering up to catch a glimpse of them. He dragged his tongue down Luo Binghe's length, his fingers teasing down to catch the heavy weight of his balls and gave a light squeeze.

With a startled gasp, Luo Binghe lunged toward. His teeth clamped down around Shen Yuan's shoulder, fangs biting into his skin. He *growled.*

It rumbled into Shen Yuan's bones; intermingling with the startling shock of pain.

He cried out, rutting shamelessly into Liu Qingge's tight fist. The tip of his cock rubbing clumsily against Luo Binghe's. An electric sensation snapped through his muscles, starting in his core and springing out to his thighs and up his spine.

He came.

His knees gave out.

"Shizun!" Luo Binghe cried, horrified. There was blood on his teeth.

Shen Yuan sank to the ground, falling into Liu Qingge's steady arms. He was reeling from his orgasm, vaguely thinking about how it had felt *quite* different to his other body. He found himself picking apart the differences, almost studying them and turning over in his mind, until he caught onto the conversation:

"He's fine. He finished."

"H-He– Shizun…!?"

Oh.

Throwing his thoughts into a semblance of order, Shen Yuan stiffened. He sat up straight, face beginning to warm with the promises of a mortified blush. Turning his head aside, he scowled and clamped a hand over the bite mark on his shoulder.

"Shizun," Luo Binghe muttered. He had dropped to his knees, tears gleaming in his eyes. "Shizun, this lowly disciple… he's… he's wrong. He never meant to bite you…" His eyes slid from the evidence of Shen Yuan's climax and back up to his shoulder. Hesitant curiosity glinted in Luo Binghe's eyes. "...Shizun?"

"What did I say about calling me that when we're… like this!" Shen Yuan snapped at him, glowering at him.

“Sh-” Luo Binghe paused and asked, “A-Yuan, did you like…?”

Not wanting to hear the *rest* of that question, Shen Yuan snarled and said, “Binghe, just shut up and take care of your shishu!”

The half-demon’s eyes darted around, soaking in every single detail as if he were afraid he might miss something. He licked his lower lip, panting. Heavy hooded eyes drew up from Shen Yuan’s midsection to land squarely on his face. “How… should this Binghe service his shishu?”

Liu Qingge stiffened beside him.

Shen Yuan might be dense, but…

He hadn’t been blind to the way both the other two reacted to his… harsh instructions. The issue was that he always felt wrongfooted and was too embarrassed to say half the things they wanted him to. Swallowing, he sat back on his heels and tried to pretend like he wasn’t sticky with sweat and his own semen.

(He wasn’t thinking about how most of it ended up on both his Qingge and Binghe.)

Eyes fluttering shut, Shen Yuan wished that he had his fan. He parted his lips, taking in a slow breath to steel himself. Then he pulled on his mask. He was a calm and cold immortal master and *completely* in control of the situation. He opened his eyes and looked dispassionately between the two of them and drawled, “Your shishu was very generous to Binghe. Won’t he return the favor?”

He watched as both the others shivered. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw their cocks twitch. He had to bite his cheek to stop himself from losing his gusto and hiding his face. Lifting his chin, he raised an eyebrow and demanded, “Well?”

“Y-Y-Yes,” Luo Binghe stammered eagerly, eyes wide. He glanced over at Liu Qingge voraciously. His eyes dropped to his demanding erection.

Feeling awkward, Shen Yuan rose to his feet.

Both stopped and flashed him concerned expressions, as if bereft he were leaving them.

Haughtily, he flicked his hair over his shoulder and snapped, “This master will bathe. Impress me, and I might allow you to help.”

Another round of shivers.

“Yes, Shizun!”

Without a fan, Shen Yuan had to smack Luo Binghe on the back of his head with his hand. He kept it light. “*What* was that?” He snarled.

A groan rolled from Luo Binghe and he stared up at him with a sinful expression. “A-Yuan… Yes, A-Yuan.” He reached down to tug a hand over his straining cock.

Clicking his tongue, Shen Yuan turned and began to give a brief wash of his body with a rag and warm water. He kept half an eye on the two men behind him. The three of them should probably talk about how *far* they would want such things to go. It would absolutely be the smart thing to do.

They needed to learn each other's boundaries and what they actually wanted so that they wouldn't stumble into a situation that left any of them uncomfortable or hurt.

Except that… he would probably die even bringing it up!!!

What the hell!?

Why were both of these two insanely powerful men such big M's!!?!

Luo Binghe, as sharp as ever, seemed to understand that he wouldn't get any more instruction from Shen Yuan. He dipped his head and said, "This Binghe will service his shishu… if Shishu would stand?"

With a weak grunt, Liu Qingge clambered to his feet.

Shen Yuan thought that he might have escaped any more *embarrassment* for the night, taking himself out of the equation and sliding into the water.

He was very wrong.

He overestimated the refractory periods of cultivators. He also underestimated how insanely hot it would be, to have Liu Qingge perched on the edge of the tub and grunting and groaning as Luo Binghe took his whole cock in his mouth.

"This… this can't… be your plans for the entire night," he had said earlier.

He had been a fool.

Because it was.

It *absolutely* was.

The problem with being stuck in a house with nothing to do meant that Shen Qingqiu had to light a candle for his hips. While he could pretty much entertain himself with the books that had been packed away into their little care package, the same couldn't be said for the other two men in the household.

Liu Qingge was a physical cultivator.

He spent his mornings running drills, easing into his practice as his body recovered, but he didn't have space to burn off his excess energy. Not that he could necessarily go too far from either Luo Binghe or Shen Qingqiu.

And while Luo Binghe could dedicate a far amount of his time to lazing about, he always inevitably became restless and began to clean imaginary messes or begged to drag them all into the kitchen.

To remedy this, Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe sparred often. But it just as often ended in… well.

"We are *outside!"* Shen Qingqiu cried, scandalized with a blush.

Liu Qingge froze. His robes were halfway off his body, with Luo Binghe sucking bruises along his torso. He blinked dazedly at Shen Qingqiu.

"It's a private garden, Shizun," Luo Binghe said, shamelessly.

Frowning, Liu Qingge shoved the half-demon off him. Then he leaped onto his feet, snatching him by the collar and dragging him inside.

Shen Qingqiu was, of course, forced to follow because of the "curse." There was no other reason he would follow…

Of course not.

He had watched the two from behind his fan, legs artfully crossed for no reason in particular.

Those two got preoccupied *often.*

Not that Shen Qingqiu could really say he wasn't at fault either. He was a cultivator now! With cultivation and training!! He wanted to spar, too! It was exciting to fend off the protagonist's blade, now that there was no threat behind it. The time in the Abyss had only honed in Luo Binghe's expertise – although, it was more rough and harried. It lacked the strict, refined elegance of Qing Jing Peak. Liu Qingge often took those sessions and turned them into training, telling them both where their guards were open and where they might tighten up a swing.

Other times…

Well.

Other times, Shen Qingqiu faced the war god – who was still recovering.

That meant that more often than not, Shen Qingqiu was able to best him. The first time that Shen Qingqiu had him pinned to the ground, swords knocked aside with his hands holding LIu Qingge's above his head, the two sat in charged silence.

He felt his shidi breathing heavily underneath him. His knees bracketed the other's hips.

Luo Binghe stood aside with his breath held, simply watching.

Without a breath of hesitation, the war god announced, “Bedroom.”

Shen Qingqiu swallowed, mouth going dry.

“Now.”

The three had scrambled quite eagerly.

It was one of the few times that Shen Qingqiu had been stripped before they even walked through the door.

Needless to say, they didn’t quite make it to the bedroom.

Despite their best efforts, boredom hounded their heels. There was only so much to be done. Meditation, practice, reading, and sharing another’s company. The three had gotten quite spoiled with a bustling city full of outings. Even when Shen Yuan hadn’t been able to leave, they had a whole world of entertainment at their fingertips with various games, movies, TV, and so on.

The forced “vacation” was possibly incrementally driving Liu Qingge insane.

Luo Binghe, who had grown up on Qing Jing Peak, was slowly acclimating back into the quiet of a xianxia cultivation world. He also occupied himself with cooking and cleaning. Sometimes he picked up a book to read with his master. He would even request his shizun to play an instrument for him or even play with him.

Liu Qingge, unfortunately, did not enjoy this as much as they did. He did relax and meditate, though without fail he always began to grow antsy and irritable. At that point, Luo Binghe would offer for them to head outside for some more physical training.

It was during one of these times that Shen Qingqiu lounged on a nearby divan and watched the two of them. He had a book open on his thighs, fingering the corner of one of the pages, as Liu Qingge walked the half-demon through a series of moves. Each round often ended with Liu Qingge knocking the sword from Luo Binghe’s hands.

There was little to no frustration on Luo Binghe’s face, even as his sword ripped from his hands once again to clatter to the ground. He set his jaw determinedly, wiping sweat off his forehead.

The zuiyin still glowed there. Luo Binghe only hid himself on the rare occasion they had visitors, who were mostly Qian Cao disciples. They refreshed their supplies, took down any requests, and also checked on the progress of their recovery.

With Luo Binghe's bloodmites swarming around his body, Shen Qingqiu had been having little to no issue with Without a Cure. Sometimes it acted up, like it had now. He felt it stir in his veins and his hand seized uncomfortably. In comparison to the other pain he had grown so used to, it was nothing. He idly shook out his hand and lost himself in thought. His mind had drifted towards the *cure* for Without a Cure.

In the other world, Luo Binghe had never fully *taken* him. There was, of course, the occasional thigh-fucking. But that was as far as *that* went.

It wasn't until Shen Qingqiu squeezed his wrist and tried to get blood flowing back into his fingertips that he realized that over the course of two months, Luo Binghe had never even asked to penetrate him. The war god had taken both Shen Yuan *and* Luo Binghe – and had been taken by Luo Binghe on more than a few occasions.

Yet…

Shen Qingqiu slid his thighs together, eyes dropping to his book. He *had* made a big stink the first time he had seen the heavenly pillar. That thing *probably* would have split him in half!

But didn't people work up to that type of stuff? Wasn't there methods to-

Shen Qingqiu flipped open his fan and glowered down at the pages of his book. He wasn't reading anymore.

Sure, the heavenly pillar was… a bit extra! But it wasn't as if Liu Qingge was by any means *average*. If he could take one, then he could take the other! Right…? Besides, it wasn't as if he were stuck in his old sickly body anymore. He was Shen Qingqiu! He wasn't a dainty little flower!!

(Both at once…?)

He was mortified that he was thinking about this.

He couldn't stop himself. [SKIP]

Luo Binghe had fit his fingers inside of him before. He had teased and stretched him, dragging his tongue along the inside of his thigh. His eyes fell shut as he tried to temper down the images – but he couldn't.

He had felt the scalding heat of the heavenly pillar squeezed between his thighs. He had watched the thick, demanding member slip and slide against his own leaking cock.

His body felt… wanting. Empty. He wondered what it might be like to be speared by the protagonist – he had watched plenty of times as Liu Qingge rode him. He always looked as if he was having a grand time, powerful thighs propelling him up and down as his cock bobbed. Luo Binghe loved to thrust into him mercilessly, while spewing the most shameless nonsense.

"Gege feels so good, clenching down around this Binghe. A-Yuan is watching us. A-Yuan is trying not to touch himself, Gege. He wants to touch you. He thinks Gege is so pretty like this…"

Without fail, the war god was wrecked afterwards, filled with bite marks and bruises.

Shen Qingqiu lifted a hand and squeezed his own shoulder. There was still a bite mark there from their first night. He knew Luo Binghe could have healed it. He hadn't… for some reason.

A body squeezed in beside him on his seat and Shen Qingqiu lurched up into a sitting position. He slammed the book closed, pressing it into his lap, as his fan covered most of his face. He stared beside him, startled to see Liu Qingge giving him just as much of a baffled look.

"Binghe said your meridians need to be cleared," the war god answered the unasked question, flatly. He raised an eyebrow as he glanced pointedly down at the book in his lap. "What's that?"

There were very few instances when Liu Qingge was interested in his reading material.

Shen Qingqiu realized that the war god had learned to read him far too well. He must have thought he was hiding porn. Clearing his throat, he waved the fan idly in front of his face. "It's a collection of histories from a wandering cultivator who traveled along the border of the realms."

With the barest hint of amusement tugging Liu Qingge's lips, he held out a hand for Shen Qingqiu's wrist. "Mn."

Biting the urge to say that there wasn't any *sex* in it, Shen Qingqiu shoved his wrist into the awaiting hand and turned his cheek. He spotted Luo Binghe watching them with a curious tilt to his head.

Even sweaty after a long round of training, he was beautiful. His curls had been tamed into a ponytail. Few escaped and curtained his face, sticking here and there.

He reached up to tug one off his forehead and behind his ear. His dark eyes drew down the length of Shen Qingqiu's body before flicking up to his face. By now, Shen Qingqiu had come to *really* understand that look in the protagonist's eyes.

It was no doubt the same look that had so many maidens in the original novel tearing open their robes and letting their legs fall apart.

"What's Shizun thinking about?" Luo Binghe asked, coyly. His lashes fluttered.

Both had been trying to get Shen Qingqiu to demand more. To tell them what to do. Very rarely did Shen Qingqiu have the face to be as shameless as Luo Binghe. A vague guiding hand, luckily, seemed to do the trick for the most part.

"Qingge is making a decent recovery," Shen Qingqiu said, instead of what he had really been thinking.

Luo Binghe's eyes darkened and his lip curled.

Somehow Shen Qingqiu had insinuated something he actually *hadn't* meant to; Liu Qingge's recovery meant that the three of them could perform the necessary Dual Cultivation required to fix the System.

Fuck. Shen Qingqiu tried to act casual as he waved his fan in front of his face. He felt the war god's cooling qi wash through his meridians and knock away any clogs caused by Without a Cure. "Mn," the war god grunted. He was too focused on the task at hand to pick up on the nuances of the conversation.

The heated expression on Luo Binghe's face lessened fractionally as he considered the two before him. He dragged a thumb across his lower lip, fang catching on the soft skin. "Shishu isn't fully recovered."

Liu Qingge scowled. "I am fine." He would forever dislike being insinuated as *weak.* The man might love them, but his pride was still unbending.

"Shidi is very strong," Shen Qingqiu said with a nod.

The frown deepened as Liu Qingge tried to figure out if that was a jab.

It wasn't. Shen Qingqiu moved on. "You still would prefer Qingge to be fully recovered."

"I am *fine,"* Liu Qingge muttered, irritably.

Amused, Luo Binghe hid his smile when he reached back and undid his hair. He carded his fingers through his curls, intending to fix his pony after it had gotten messy from training. "If Shizun thinks we're prepared…"

"If Binghe is *determined* to go through with this…" Shen Qingqiu said with a sigh. "Then we might as well prepare fully."

The war god drew his attention away from the qi circulation to glower at Shen Qingqiu. "Qingqiu. I. Am-"

"I am talking about *arrays,* Shidi," Shen Qingqiu said and poked his nose with his fan. "Not your physical recovery."

"Arrays?" Luo Binghe echoed, thoughtfully.

"Mn," Shen Qingqiu said with a nod. "If the Huan Hua Palace was able to entrap a heavenly demon, what is preventing us from deploying similar methods for us to 'exorcise' the System?"

Interest sparked in Luo Binghe's eyes. "This disciple will begin researching immediately."

Only minorly mollified, his shidi sighed through his nose and narrowed his eyes. Even if his physical prowess wasn't being questioned any longer, he wasn't any more excited about the prospect of *research.*

Shen Qingqiu tried to soothe him with a promise that it wouldn't take longer than a day or two.

He, unfortunately, couldn't have been more wrong.

A letter to Yue Qingyuan didn't yield too many results. Even if the sect leader had been instrumental in entrapping Tianlang-Jun, he hadn't had the wherewithal to study the array, as he kindly reminded them in his letter. It had been the epitome of gentlemanly politeness and with an apology, attached to a scroll that may help their needs.

But it was distant.

Where letters from Yue Qingyuan were usually overflowing with many inquiries and suggestions, this one was bare minimum. Short and sweet.

Shen Qingqiu tried not to let it bother him.

They requested specific books and scrolls from both the Qing Jing and Qiong Ding libraries. They even sent a request to the array masters of another peak.

While they researched during the day, Luo Binghe attempted to reform the array at night in their dreams. He had sent Meng Mo to scavenge through the memories and dreams of Huan Hua Palace members. The protagonist himself was completely unable to enter Yue Qingyuan's mind at night (only Liu Qingge was happy about that) which left… *Tianlang-Jun.*

Luo Binghe put it off, waiting for Meng Mo to return. They spent more time during the day scouring many scrolls and books, trying to piece together an array for their purpose. It was exhausting work. Liu Qingge tried to help. The fine art of arrays was not his style. He might utilize talismans and other fast-acting spells, but he didn't *invent* them.

His attention span always waned, and he desperately tried to tamper his restless energy. It only made him grumpy and sullen.

When the dream demon finally made his reappearance, he came with souring news. Huan Hua Palace had upped its defences, making it nearly impenetrable for the dream demon. The minds that he was able to skim had little to no recollection of the event that occurred over twenty years ago. Any that might know anything about it was either buried or hidden under far too many protections.

That left…

Luo Binghe groaned into the mattress. He was a few leg kicks away from a full toddler meltdown.

With a snort, Liu Qingge flopped down beside him. He sat against the headboard, arms crossed. Both of them looked beautifully undone in their sleep clothes. The ties to Liu Qingge's robes were loose, allowing a large chunk of his pecks to peek out from the pale fabric. His skin was marked with bites and bruises.

Luo Binghe whined. He said something, but it was muffled.

Shaking his head, Shen Qingqiu sat on the edge of the bed. He let a hand rest on his disciple's back and ran soothing circles from one broad shoulder to the next. "While we could make the array on our own, it would take far less time if we were able to get some more clues." And it would possibly be safer.

There was a worrying thought that pricked the back of Shen Qingqiu's mind whenever he thought of getting rid of the System. He shoved it back every time it cropped up.

Luo Binghe mumbled something else.

That was a little harsh…! It wasn't as if Luo Binghe had really shared a *real* conversation with Tianlang-Jun, but was it really enough to formulate the opinion of *hating* him? Shen Qingqiu pressed his lips into a thin line. He supposed he didn't blame the protagonist. Tianlang-Jun certainly didn't make a *great* first impression. He ignored the slight heat that threatened to rise to his cheeks from a certain memory and patted his disciple consolingly. "It's not as if you have to *converse* with him. This master is certain that Binghe will be able to slip into Tianlang-Jun's memories and we'll be able to examine it together no problem!"

After a moment, the sullen half-demon murmured into the blankets.

"Mn," Liu Qingge affirmed as he leaned in. He slid a hand underneath the back of Luo Binghe's robes and rubbed his lower back. "Together."

Turning over, Luo Binghe peeked up at both of them. His dark eyes glittered with his bullied tears, his lower lip pouting. He blinked pathetically at them.

With a "tch," Liu Qingge pulled his hand out and pinched his thigh instead. "Cry baby. Just get it over with."

"...maybe if Shishu gives this Binghe some encouragement…?" Luo Binghe said coyly. He rolled his hips over and splayed his hand around his groin, letting the fabric grow taught.

"Binghe," Shen Qingqiu scorned without any real heat. He turned his face aside.

"Shizun's encouragement would work well too…" Luo Binghe said, licking his lips as his eyes fell to Shen Qingqiu's hips.

"Binghe!" Shen Qingqiu scorned.

Luo Binghe cut off any more reprimands with his mouth. [SKIP]

In moments, Shen Yuan was divested of his robes. They had ended up somewhere across the room. Lips trailed kisses down his stomach. His breath hitched. Luo Binghe looked up at him

longingly, dark lashes creating shadows on his cheeks. He nipped the tender skin of his lower belly and dragged his teeth down into the nest of hair above his groin. Hands gripped his hips, keeping him locked in position. Shen Yuan breathed in through his nose, ignoring how heat licked up his torso. The protagonist teasingly swayed his bare backside towards his shishu.

Not before long, Luo Binghe was swallowing his cock with his shishu yanking on his hair and driving into him at a ruthless pace.

By the cries from Luo Binghe alone, he was *sufficiently* "encouraged."

It never ceased to amaze Shen Qingqiu how well Luo Binghe mastered the dream realm. They stood inside a decrepit, dark cave. Remnants of an array carved into the ground. Shen Qingqiu sank into a graceful crouch, curiously following the careful, arching lines. He hummed thoughtfully.

Most of the array was unfortunately buried underneath rock. Parts that fell away from Tianlang-Jun's supposed line of sight were hazy and unreliable.Shen Qingqiu examined one of the blurry edges, trying to decipher what *could* have gone there.

"Is it enough?" Liu Qingge asked. He frowned at the figure near the center of the array; a rotting, putrid thing that was crushed underneath mounds of stone.

Luo Binghe had assured them that it wasn't Tianlang-Jun; well, not his consciousness. The man had left too much of an imprint on this place for Luo Binghe to erase him without worrying that he would incidentally alter the memory of the array. At the very least, he was able to mitigate some of the smell.

"For what purpose?" It was a new speaker, unfortunately far too familiar to Shen Qingqiu by this point.

Both Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe flinched, swords transpiring from thin air into palms of their hands, as they faced the curious onlooker.

Clearing his throat, Shen Qingqiu raised up onto his feet and stepped up to stand beside the other two. He folded his hands behind his back and greeted, "Tianlang-Jun."

The former(?) emperor shouldn't be here.

(Shen Qingqiu had yet to broach the subject with Luo Binghe; it seemed impossible that his disciple might be willing to abjugate his throne but at the same time… he wasn't sure how attached Luo Binghe truly was to it.)

His heart spasmed in his chest and tight discomfort washed through him. While Luo Binghe could recreate the memory in his own dream realm, there wasn't the same assuredness that

would come from examining the memory in Tianlang-Jun's own mind.

He should be fast asleep, far too deep into slumber to even notice their presence. How the hell was he here now!?

Luo Binghe's expression soured.

Wearing an amused smile, the former(?) emperor drew his eyes between all three of them before he wandered to the figure in the middle. The prisoner snarled, desperately trying to move. Wet, weak breaths heaved from the decrepit form.

Tianlang-Jun crouched before it. "I don't suppose that I've offended the three of you so much for you to consider trapping me again, mn?"

The dream figure snarled weakly. Each breath echoed around them, pained and miserable. Blood poured from his mouth, dripping and drenching the stone around them. Rot burned in Shen Qingqiu's nose.

Then he startled with an epiphany.

Dream manipulation. Tianlang-Jun had taken over. Now everything focused on that center figure, each pathetic wheeze and weak snarl.

Then a broken whimper.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Luo Binghe. His disciple had his jaw set, and was only slightly ashen. He would be prepared to whisk them all from the dream the moment that his father showed the barest hint of aggression.

"No," Liu Qingge answered.

Tianlang-Jun raised his eyebrows and tore his eyes away from memory of himself. He flicked a curious look at him. "If you needed to study the array, son, you could have asked," he said, amused. He didn't question Liu Qingge. It appeared that the war god's word was enough for him.

Perhaps Liu Qingge's integrity preceded him.

With a sneer, Luo Binghe growled. "What this lord does is of no import to *you."*

Amusement glittered in Tianlang-Jun's eyes and he smiled. "You're quite like her, you know." After a moment of observing Luo Binghe bristle he added, "That *is* a compliment."

"Tianlang-Jun," Shen Qingqiu stepped in before his disciple said something that might disrupt Tianlang-Jun's current mental stability, "This master appreciates your cooperation, but we only need but a few moments to read the array as is."

"For the entity that possesses you?" Tianlang-Jun guessed.

Shen Qingqiu felt a cool wave of shock wash over him.

The former(?) emperor smiled. “You were in my care for nearly six months, you think I would not have noticed?”

Luo Binghe bared his teeth and snarled. The only sign of the two battling over control of the dream were mere flickers of light and the intensity of blood that permeated the dank cave.

“Now, now, my unruly son,” Tianlang-Jun said, amused. “Do you truly think I’ve lived as long as I have without encountering dream demons? I am well acquainted with their cultivation. Let your father help you.”

“This lord would sooner-“

Shen Qingqiu cleared his throat. He plucked a fan from his sleeve and began idly fanning his face. “If Tianlang-Jun wishes to help, perhaps we might be able to study the array in better lighting?”

Pleased, Tianlang-Jun nodded. All at once the cavern brightened. The figure in the center vanished, and the space grew.

Luo Binghe’s jaw twitched. He flashed Shen Qingqiu a watery-eyed betrayed glance.

With a patient hum, Shen Qingqiu reached up and patted his cheek. “Why fight the tides when we can use them to our advantage, mn?”

“Is the array accurate?” Luo Binghe asked his father sharply.

“The array did not change,” Tianlang-Jun assured, nonplussed by his son’s animosity. He took a step back and observed them with amusement curling the corner of his lips.

Shen Qingqiu returned to his study.

Alone.

He sighed.

Tianlang-Jun and Luo Binghe faced off in a quiet test of wills. Hundreds of years of experience versus the pure stubborn will of the protagonist.

Meanwhile Liu Qingge watched both with vague interest, not even attempting to try and decipher the array.

“Here…” Shen Qingqiu said aloud, hoping to tug his disciple away from the testosterone-fueled standoff. “Binghe, does this look like an identifier?”

Before he could answer Tianlang-Jun said, “That identified me. The array also drew on my qi, weakening me.”

Shen Qingqiu hummed. “This configuration… the identifier. This… the power consumption?”

In a moment Tianlang-Jun was crouching beside him. He traced the lines with a claw, scraping the stone. “This piece identifies my-“

“This disciple will help Shizun!” Luo Binghe cried. He jumped down to join them, throwing a withering glare at his father. “*You* can go.”

Humor lit Tianlang-Jun’s eyes. “I was only-“

“This lord highly suggests you *shut your mouth.”*

“Mn, if I do, how will I speak?”

Shen Qingqiu sighed heavily.

He shouldn’t have tried bringing anyone else in.

Studying the rest of the array took far longer than necessary, with Luo Binghe interrupting his father whenever he tried to answer any of Shen Qingqiu’s questions. Only one person in that entire cavern was having fun, much to the expense of all the rest.

“What is it, Shizun?” Luo Binghe asked. All of his hair was pulled up into a hasty pony, with a few curls escaping and decorating either side of his face. He had his sleeves pushed up to his elbows, with ink stains on his fingers. Several scrolls and books lay open in front of him. His elegant calligraphy spanned across several pages, each detailing specific parts of the array they wished to create. It was like frankensteining pieces together to create a working whole.

“...Tianlang-Jun had mentioned that the array only finished activating once he was *fully* inside its bounds,” Shen Qingqiu said, frowning down at a large piece of parchment that spread across the span of a desk.

At the moment, Liu Qingge sprawled out on a set of cushions. His arm lay over his eyes, and a book was hanging loose in his fingertips. It was difficult to tell whether or not he was sleeping, as he hadn’t begun snoring.

Frowning, Luo Binghe considered the pieces of paper in front of him. They nearly had the design for the array complete; this was just another hurdle. Irritation made his jaw set.

Shen Qingqiu was silently proud of his disciple. He didn’t have to expand on the issue at hand; the System was a massive unknowable entity. If they wished to trap it as Tianlang-Jun had been trapped, then they would need to gather *all* of its essence and ensure that it was within the bounds of the array before it fully activated.

That meant in the span of a single night, they had to… “cure” the “curse,” excise the System from *both* Shen Qingqiu and Shang Qinghua, *and* somehow lure it into the confines of the

array.

It… might be an impossible task.

Luo Binghe's expression was shifting between stubborn determination and hopeless irritation.

"Reverse these two," a voice said, fingers pressing to the sketched out array in front of Shen Qingqiu. "Instead of drawing in, have it push it out."

Several things happened all at once:

Luo Binghe launched across the table to capture Shen Qingqiu in his arms and haul him away from Tianlang-Jun.

That sent several papers and scrolls careening to the floor.

In seconds, Liu Qingge was on his feet with his hand fumbling for Cheng Luan. The book he had in hand launched across the room and cracked against the far wall.

A third body placed a platter of refreshments on a side table, seeming nonplussed by all the shouting that overtook the large study.

It took *several* long minutes to calm everyone down.

Even longer for Shen Qingqiu's own heart to stop trying to crawl out of his throat.

Tianlang-Jun stood, very pleased with himself, as he pointedly made a few sloppy corrections to the parchment.

A possessive growl emanated from Luo Binghe, his arms locked tightly around Shen Qingqiu while attempting to angle Liu Qingge behind him.

"Now, now," Tianlang-Jun said, entirely too amused, "that's no way to greet your father!"

"Die," Luo Binghe snarled.

Never mind. It took even *longer* to get everyone to calm down.

Shen Qingqiu barely held his heavenly demon back from attacking the other. While he was cautious of the effect Xin Mo had on Tianlang-Jun, he was more worried about the destruction a fight between the two would wrought. Eventually, there was a table between the three and the former(?) emperor. His nephew was somewhere around, Shen Qingqiu had lost sight of him sometime during the scuffle.

"Now," Shen Qingqiu said, breathing out through his nose as he wrapped his hands around a tea cup. "What was it you were saying?"

Grouchily, Luo Binghe plucked the tea from Shen Qingqiu's hands. He set it aside and glowered towards the platter of refreshments.

Without a sigh, Shen Qingqiu settled his hands in his lap. His disciple would not be sated until he was allowed to provide them food himself.

“Reverse the intentions,” Tianlang-Jun said, considering the pieces of the array. “If you do not think that you can encapsulate the entirety of the entity, then build an array to throw it *out*.”

“What would you know?” Luo Binghe muttered, his glower one puffed out lip from being a full pout.

Tianlang-Jun did not look up at them. There was a slight breath of hesitation, as if he were digesting what he was about to say and tasting them on his own tongue. His cruel amusement melted into fondness. “My Xiyan was a genius when it came to arrays. She would talk to me about them at length.” He trailed a claw along the parchment.

“You’ve… spoken with Qinghua-shidi,” Shen Qingqiu guessed. That would explain how the man was now reminiscent when he spoke about his former lover.

“We’ve had our fair share of conversations,” Tianlang-Jun admitted, smiling as if he had made a joke. His eyes flickered to Luo Binghe. “Come. Let’s divest your mate of his parasite.”

None of them moved.

“Are you wondering about my motivations?” Tianlang-Jun asked, humored. “Would you believe me if I said it was because I am bored and it sounded intriguing?”

“Yes,” Liu Qingge answered.

Tianlang-Jun laughed. “Ah, you might. My son would not.”

He said no more on the topic and managed to incite his son into arguing with him over the array to get them to begin working on it once again. Eventually, with Tianlang-Jun’s insight, they were able to configure a new plan: instead of trying to force the System to manifest physically in front of them and be trapped into the array, they would force it *out.*

Once every detail of their plan was ironed out, Luo Binghe announced that it was time for him to prepare dinner. He said it in a way that clearly did not welcome Tianlang-Jun or Zhuzhi-Lang to the table.

As the two were (rudely) invited to leave, Tianlang-Jun drew to a temporary stop near Shen Qingqiu. He smiled at him in a way that seemed overly familiar. He said, “You were right. About the echoes.” He drew his head back and closed his eyes.

Shen Qingqiu didn’t respond, because it didn’t feel as if the heavenly demon was speaking to *him.*

“It hurt…” He admitted, breathing out. “But… for a while there… she was alive again.” He didn’t seem to expect an answer from Shen Qingqiu. After that, he left with his nephew. The two disappeared as they had entered: without a trace.

They helped Luo Binghe make dinner. They cleaned up afterwards. Then they went out into the early evening to run through some practice drills to try and chase away some of the ants in Liu Qingge's bones. Spars against Liu Qingge were no longer an assured victory; in fact, they felt much like they had before this entire mess. Liu Qingge would disarm Shen Qingqiu fastidiously with the same confidence a man would have navigating back to his home in the dark.

Arrogant, Shen Qingqiu almost spat in a rare (and alarming) wave of anger. His back slammed into the dirt. As he caught his breath, he examined his emotions and tried to figure out why he thought that. Arrogance meant a sense of superiority – but there was none on Liu Qingge's face as he stood over him and began explaining where Shen Qingqiu went wrong.

He didn't show any exaggerated pity or worry either, after slamming Shen Qingqiu to the ground. He trusted and knew Shen Qingqiu's strengths, and only offered a hand because he was just as sticky as Luo Binghe, even if he tried to hide it.

They were both on their feet, and Luo Binghe was behind him and gently wiping any dirt off his robes.

Sometimes, sandwiched like this between the two, a whisper of discomfort snaked up Shen Qingqiu's spine. It was a feeling that had only started when he had returned to this body. It seemed something more like a memory; like how sword forms and calligraphy were known to this body. This body knew to fear the proximity of others.

He tried not to think about that.

As much as he didn't want to, Shen Qingqiu pointed out, "We've finished all our preparations." He didn't add that Liu Qingge seemed sufficiently recovered; he wasn't completely recovered. He was still leagues away from his former level but he was certainly holding his own against Shen Qingqiu.

Luo Binghe surprised him by saying, "We should inform Shang Qinghua and Mobei."

The fact that he thought to warn them at all was extremely kind of the protagonist. It showed he might even care for the two.

"Mn." Liu Qingge hooked a hand around Shen Qingqiu's waist and drew him near, pressing his nose into his neck.

"Then…" Shen Qingqiu shifted on his feet, feeling somewhat nervous and embarrassed, "...we use the array? And fix the System?"

Luo Binghe's eyes fell to the side, betraying a moment of uncertainty. It was gone in an instant, washed away with a warm smile. "If Shizun thinks we're prepared."

“Array is done,” Liu Qingge pointed out. “Why wait?”

The answer took too long, leaving a weighted silence in the courtyard. Shen Qingqiu knew the problem at once: his outright rejection of the heavenly pillar during their first time together. Certainly Luo Binghe should know it wouldn't be an issue any longer! He should know that Shen Qingqiu wanted…!

“Maybe Shang Qinghua will wish to be exorcised too,” Luo Binghe said after a lengthy silence. He was trying too hard to meet both of their eyes and keep his expression pleasant.

Shen Qingqiu might start choking on blood.

He knew what he had to say. He just… had to have the fucking face to say it!

Why was it up to him, ah!?

Luo Binghe was *the* Protagonist!!! How many maidens had swooned and cried (pleasantly) over that massive weapon between his legs!? Of course, of *course,* anyone would be curious to give it a chance!

A part of him rolled his eyes at his own insistence of his sexuality – as if he wasn’t yowling like a cat in heat, eager to be raise his ass in the air-

What.

The fuck.

What the hell was he thinking!?

That hadn’t felt like his own thoughts-

Almost as if-

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe’s attention sharpened on him.

The hand on his waist tightened as Liu Qingge watched every minute flicker of his expression.

“...this master…” Shen Qingqiu turned his head away from both of them. He took a few moments to regather his composure. He pawed at his belt for his fan, only to realize that it had been knocked aside during a rather formidable attack from the war god. He cleared his throat. “He trusts… no harm will come to him from… either of you.”

Liu Qingge stared at him curiously, not quite understanding.

Ashamed, Luo Binghe dropped his eyes. He said, “...Shizun… will only have to permit this one for this single occasion, then… he won’t have to force-”

“*Force?”* Shen Qingqiu echoed with a sharp snap. “Who is forcing!?”

“Shizun?” Luo Binghe stared at him, startled.

Could this *foolish* man think that Shen Qingqiu didn’t *want-*

Sputtering and red faced, Shen Qingqiu smacked Luo Binghe on the side of his head. “You’d never ‘force’ or ‘coerce’ this master into *anything* he didn’t want! As if being taken by Binghe is a chore!”

“Ah.” Liu Qingge suddenly understood.

Eyes widening, Luo Binghe stared at him hopefully. “...Shizun?”

Too embarrassed to continue this topic of conversation, Shen Qingqiu tore away from both of them and stiffly started making his way back inside. “Come. This master wishes for a bath before retiring.”

“Shizun means it?” Luo Binghe pressed, breath hitched with hesitant excitement. “Shizun wants this Binghe?”

“Idiot,” Liu Qingge said with a heavy sigh. After a moment of consideration he clarified, “Both of you. Idiots.”

Ignoring him, Luo Binghe eagerly ran after Shen Qingqiu. “Shizun, you want… you want this Binghe to take you?”

“*Binghe!!”* Shen Qingqiu shouted. “You know *very* well what this master said! Now, *drop it!”*

“B-But Shizun!”

“*Idiots.”*

Later that evening, in the dark as Liu Qingge slumbered and Luo Binghe lay with his head on Shen Yuan’s stomach, Shen Yuan stared up at the darkened ceiling. He figured that only Liu Qingge was truly asleep. While Luo Binghe imitated his deep breaths and had long since stopped moving, he suspected his disciple kept a sharp eye on him. He had since the moment in the courtyard – trying to peer past Shen Yuan’s mask and read his quiet worries.

Shen Yuan ran his fingers through Luo Binghe’s hair, taking care not to disturb his braid. He breathed out through his nose and closed his eyes. His heart pounded with unease.

In his mind, he reached out tentatively, *...hello?*

The thought echoed out through his consciousness. It felt silly to be crying out like a victim in a horror film, stepping into a darkened house and calling out to see if anyone was there.

Almost as if the mere action would expose any who might be lurking around hidden corners. but also uncertain of what to do if anything ever answered back.

Anticipation closed around his throat like a snare.

There was no answer.

It wasn’t the silence of an empty room.

It was the silence of a living room that had once housed a jubilant family. Its walls held the scrapes of careless children, its rugs stained with old spills, and its framework once bore the weight of both shared laughs and vicious arguments. Now nothing was left but a vague echo of their voices and worn impressions on a once favored chair.

Still, there was a sense of unease. As if someone lurked just outside of his field of vision.

Shen Yuan only fell asleep after Luo Binghe tugged his consciousness into a deep slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Summary:

Shen Qingqiu/Shen Yuan has an identity crisis - he doesn't have a role to play and doesn't want to end up disappointing Liu Qingge and Luo Binghe. They both assure him that they love him no matter what he looks like or who they thought he was.

SQQ begins to realize that he's never bottomed for LBH and... he wants to! But he has issues communicating it.

The three occupy their time much like rabbits do when there's not much else to do!

While they're waiting for LQG to recover, SQQ has the idea to try and trap the System with a similar array used to trap Tianlang-Jun. Though, that means they need to research it. While they reach out to many different resources (YQY, Huan Hua Palace, libraries, and other array experts) they are unable to come to anything conclusive. That leaves them to search through Tianlang-Jun's memories. You can start reading that here.

Back to the top.

Thanks again for everyone for your patience!

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